

ADVENT: IT'S ABOUT TIME

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
Advent Sunday + December 3, 2017

Jesus said, “*Then they will see the ‘Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.*” (Mark 13:26)

What is Advent, and how shall we understand it? Some time ago I heard a story about the late Leonard LeSourd. Leonard LeSourd was a writer and the editor of *Guideposts* magazine, a popular Christian devotional publication. Many years before his days with *Guideposts* he was a college student, struggling, as most college students do, with papers, exams, reading lists, and all the social distractions that come with campus life. At the beginning of one semester, a history professor announced that half the course grade would be based on the term paper. What is more, the term paper needed to be in the professor’s hands by 9:00 a.m. on November 13th. The professor would accept no excuses.

Now fast-forward the clock about two months, to the week before the paper was due. Where had the time gone? LeSourd recalled how in a panic he realized the paper was to be finished in a few short days, yet he hadn’t even picked a topic. He poured himself into the project, reading and researching until his eyes ached. After staying up all of the final night, he was still frantically typing the paper at the last minute. He finished at 9:05 a.m., and without even proofreading his work he rushed to the professor’s office, knocked on the door, and held out the paper for the professor to receive. The professor did not extend his hands. Instead he said, “No, I will not accept it. I said 9:00 a.m., and it is now 9:15 a.m.” LeSourd pleaded with him, “Won’t you even read it?” The professor replied, “No. I’m truly sorry, but the deadline has passed. You are too late.”

What is Advent, and how shall we comprehend the mysteries of the Christian faith expressed within it? Advent is about time. Advent is about God’s time that he gives to us to have and use, or waste and lose. Advent is about time eventually running out – and we’re not talking here about shopping days before Christmas. We’re talking about something actually beyond comprehension. In today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark we encounter one of the many mysterious passages in the Bible that speak of time’s running out on a cosmic scale. “*The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the ‘Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory,*” is how Mark records the words of Jesus.

Today’s Old Testament reading (Isaiah 64:1-9) anticipates the same event. The prophet Isaiah looked around and saw such deplorable conditions that he pleaded with God to hurry the day: *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.* The Scriptures tell us again and again that time will soon run out, that Christ will soon return and gather us perfectly into his presence. It will be God’s promised Day of righteousness, when Christ will come again to reveal and judge all the hidden hurts of human history, when every eye shall behold him *robed in dreadful majesty*, when some will see the true Messiah with great rapture, and others with tears of sorrow: *deeply wailing, deeply wailing*, because for them it will be too late to get their house in order.

When is all this to be fulfilled? When is the paper due? Are we too late? Looking at the world today, it would be easy to conclude that the stage is set for the end times. Some fear that we are on the brink of a conflict with North Korea that could engulf the entire world in a nuclear war. Others declare that we have passed the tipping point with global warming, and have only just

begun to see the devastation of rising sea waters and superstorms. Meanwhile, elements of humanity unhinged from any moral balance commit acts of violence so evil that Satan must be laughing with delight: 58 dead in Las Vegas; 26 dead in a Sutherland Springs, Texas church; 8 dead on a New York City bike path. Are we nearing the end? Is Christ coming soon to clean up the mess? It's been the arrogance of Christians in every age to declare their own time to be the most sinful in all of history. "Surely the Lord is coming soon to judge this evil generation," they have said. Yet day after day keeps dawning. Whatever timetable Christ is on has eluded us. Indeed, the delay between his first and second comings has been one of the great theological embarrassments of Christianity. How do we explain the two advents of Jesus, the second of which seems late to the point of canceled?

Years ago when I was in high school, our varsity basketball team faced a great foe on the last day of the season. In true dramatic fashion we found ourselves down by one point with one second left on the clock. The ball was ours to inbound; the only hope would be to get off a final desperation shot. I was a spectator to all this (having been cut at the beginning of the season), but I recall a player named Steve receiving the pass well behind the half court line. He spun around and hurled the ball two-thirds the length of the court just as the buzzer sounded. The packed gymnasium fell silent. Time seemed to stop as the ball flew through the air. Advent is like the flight of that ball. This time between the two comings of Jesus is like the flight of that ball. You see, once the ball left the shooter's hands, it had been decided that we would win. The ball's course was set, nothing could stop it or alter its course. But the final victory was not ours until the ball, miraculously, went through the hoop. So think of Christmas, the first advent of Jesus, as the ball's leaving the shooter's hands. And think of the Day of the Lord, the second advent of Jesus, as the ball's swishing through the net for the final victory.

You and I live between the times – between the comings of Jesus. The cross and resurrection have sounded the buzzer: game over for evil and death. The ball is in flight; nothing and no one can stop it. The Day of the Lord may be near, or the Day of the Lord may not be near. As for me, I'm going to break ranks with any and all apocalyptic preachers and say that the Day of the Lord probably isn't at hand. The suspended period of time in which we live is likely to continue. My money is on the sun's coming up tomorrow, and the day after. In fact, the time is more liable to run out on your mortal life and mine, than it is likely to run out on the cosmos. *Therefore keep awake, said Jesus, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or a midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.*

What time is it in your life? Is it dawn, or evening, or cockcrow, or midnight? Some clever mathematician has calculated the following parallel between the average life expectancy of 79 years and a 24 hour day. If you sleep until 7 am, you are already 23-years old when you arise. When you sit down for your 10 am meeting, you're 33. When you arrive for your 12:30 lunch, you're 41. When the markets close at 4 pm, you're 53. If you wait till 7 pm to eat dinner, you'll be 63. If you stay up for the evening news at 11 pm, you'll be 75 when it starts, and 77 when they sign off. But keep awake, because by then the rooster is about to crow. The master is about to knock at the door. (Now you know why watching the New York Football Giants takes years off your life!) Alas, if only life were so predictable that we could press our days into some mathematical formula and calculate exactly what time it is. The truth is, we just never know the number of our days. The only thing we can say for sure is that we will all eventually run out of time in this mortal life.

What do we do with this information? What is the Advent message for us? In the General Confession of Morning Prayer we hear these words: *we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.* Think of the

first half of the sentence as Advent, and the second half as Lent. The second half – those things we have done which we ought not to have done, those words you said which you shouldn't have said, those extra portions you ate which you shouldn't have eaten – you can save those worries for Lent. But the message of Advent concerns those things we have left undone which we ought to have done. And it is the season to realize that we have been given the time to do them before the time runs out. What have you left undone? What are you putting off that you know you need to do? The season of Advent, coinciding with these shortening days of the year, reminds us that time is a perishable gift. *Now* is the time to do the things we have left undone. Now is the time while we still have the time. Now is the time before it is too late.

Let me give you a quick snapshot of someone who at least on one occasion was committed to leaving nothing undone in this mortal life. It's a story that I heard over a lunch one day with a parishioner in a former parish. A man in his 60's attended the funeral of a colleague's father. He didn't know the man who died, but he went to the service in order to support his business associate. At the funeral he was struck by the glowing words of love and thanks that were spoken of the deceased. He wondered: did the departed man get to hear these things in life? Did his family members and friends speak such words to him while he still lived? Or was this just a public assuaging of guilt over having left unsaid the things they ought to have said?

The man didn't wait around for an answer. The first thing he did after the funeral was pick up the phone to call his own father, a man well into his 80's who lived 9 hours away by car. With urgent joy he told his Dad what a great father and friend he'd been for more than 60 years. "Thank you, Dad; I love you." And then, recognizing that the hour of this mortal life was getting late for both of them, he got in the car, and drove those nine hours, and spoke those words to his father face-to-face. It was the father who told me these things over lunch. He said that the words of his son were one of the greatest gifts he'd ever received.

Advent is like the man's car trip, hurrying to greet his father face-to-face before it was too late. Advent is about time: time given, time running short, time running out. Time is a perishable gift from God.

My prayer is that we all use God's gift of time to do the things we have left undone, to say the words we have left unsaid, to cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life, so that when Christ shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing.

+