

Advent 2 Year A 2025

In this age of the internet, I, like you I suspect, get flooded with all kinds of commentary. For me it's on church matters, since the AI gods know that I'm a priest: theology, liturgy, music... you name it. Some of these reflections I subscribe to... but many so-called commentators just take it upon themselves to send me their latest ruminations... In these days everyone is a podcaster; or sub-stacker; or a digital creator. Over the last several weeks it seems I've been getting more than a usual number messages, and the predominant theme has been about 'waiting.' Advent, the season of waiting. One piece was written by a theology professor at my seminary, about three hundred words, and the gist was this: We so want instant gratification; we are so in a hurry... but Advent is the season in the church year when we should slow down (like that's going to happen)... that we slow down and wait expectantly for the birth of Christ; "What is God telling you amid your waiting?" the writer asked.

And then another missive arrived this Friday, an Episcopal priest, another reflection on waiting. Again, the theme of busyness, and how we need to slow down and avoid the retail distractions of our culture, and then wait expectantly for the consummation of God's promises. And then yesterday, another one, this time by a layperson.... He mused that waiting is character building; that waiting teaches us to hope. And now that I think about it, just about every Advent in my being reared and formed in the church, the preacher has said the same thing: Advent is a season of waiting. We are to wait with patience, and hopeful expectation for the coming of the Christ child.

But it strikes me that nowhere in scripture are we instructed to wait. In our Gospel reading today, Matthew is calling on his apocalyptic chops. Apocalyptic being the literary genre of immediate, dramatic, and cosmic revelation. We encounter John the Baptist exhorting the people to repent, baptism by water the outward and visible sign. “The kingdom of God is at hand,” he says. He doesn’t say it’s coming soon, nor does he say anything about waiting. The word for repentance in the Greek is *metanoia*. A word rich with meaning. It doesn’t mean to say you’re sorry for the sins you have committed. It means literally to change one’s mind towards reasonableness, to attune one’s mind towards the Truth; to turn one’s imagination to the unfolding of mystery. It means to choose awareness. This state of being is not something to which we aspire, nor is it only possible in the next life; it is for here and now. And this *metanoia*, this repentance, is marked first and foremost by urgency. Matthew has John pleading with his followers to turn from their distractions, and focus on the task at hand, and that task at hand is to get with the ushering in of God’s reign on earth; to make a straight path, as he puts it; quoting the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Matthew is being typological in this passage. He’s using the recurrent images of biblical history. He places John the Baptist in the desert, reminding us of Israel’s sojourn in the desert of Sinai. His rustic persona would remind one of the prophet Elijah. He names John the Baptist as the voice crying out in the desert of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke some four hundred years before... evoking the memory of God’s liberating promise and

presence to the Judean captives in Babylon. It is a pattern that recurs over and over again in Hebrew scripture and in the New Testament, that God is forever calling God's people to recognize God's liberating presence among them. Repentance. Calling God's people to participate as the agents of liberation and a just sustainability of their common life. Jesus, of course, will be for the Gospel writers the archetype of this agency, but Jesus is meaningless and powerless without the solidarity of the community who follow him.... A people of metanoia. Repentance is as much about recognition as it is about change. Metanoia is the very means of faith.

So, I don't know about you, but I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of being told to wait patiently on the Lord by the institutional church. Thoughts and prayers. The church has for centuries spoken of God's kingdom as a decidedly future event, whether its consummation comes about in the so-called "Last Days," or worse, in the next life. Why won't we hear the wisdom of the ancient scribes that the kingdom of God is now? All of the Gospel writers describe God's kingdom as a present reality. It's as if the church doesn't trust its own sacred lore, the vision proclaimed in Holy Scripture. Or that the church doesn't trust its own people with such a liberating and imaginative vision. And, moreover, the church has also spoken, and still speaks, of God's kingdom as being within, making the idea of salvation personal and self-indulgent. Modernity has made such self-interest an obsession. So we wait for God to come into our hearts, whatever that means, or we wait for some arcane knowledge of God that will descend upon us, and bring meaning and happiness, and a

sense of well-being to our lives. The church has chosen to call that individual pursuit, salvation, for which we are to wait patiently. It has proved profitable for the church to dangle the carrot at the end of a stick, just out of the reach of the faithful. That seems a conflict of interest, perhaps. And certainly, such an understanding of salvation is not warranted in scripture.

Scripture offers us in its teaching quite a different take on salvation. Salvation for the Gospel scribes is about raising up the poor, and the outcasts, the marginalized and the disenfranchised. It's about peacemaking. It's about radical hospitality. It is about the restoration of community in which there are no outcasts, in which all are equals. Salvation manifests in community. Jesus is not merely a warm feeling inside. Nor is he our personal friend. Jesus is a revolutionary spirit, a spirit that calls us to rise to our true humanity; to enlightened action as a community. I'll say it again, as we begin a new church year, Salvation isn't about me, it's about our neighbor.

Ironically the institutional church has in no small way, but in many ways, watered down the revolutionary vision of the Gospels. In fact, in our reading for today, Matthew offers a scathing rebuke of the religious leadership, the institution of his day... he sees an institution distracted from its true vision and calling; an institution that has become self-serving, and callously indifferent to its mission. "The axe is at that tree," Matthew proclaims... and God will raise up people God can use, from the very stones of earth if necessary, he says... in order to effect God's purposes in our world.

Good people, Utopia is not just around the corner. In truth, Utopia is not the aim of our faith, nor the aim of God, if I may be so bold. Certainly not the aim of the Gospel scribes. The world will always be as it is. There will always be abuse and oppression by the powerful. We know that now in spades. There will always be wars and rumors of wars... but in every act of love, in every act of kindness and compassion, in every graceful moment of empathy, God's life breaks into our world, just as it always has. I'm saying that the kingdom of God is here and now despite the evil that opposes it. It sets its very roots amid the dysfunction and brokenness and ruin of human existence. So it is urgent that we be about the rudiments of the kingdom, that we abandon false hopes and deceptions; that we deconstruct our illusions... that we repent in short, because the time is always short. We have brothers and sisters, as we speak, who languish in injustice; brothers and sisters who are hungry, brothers and sisters who are victims of violence... brothers and sisters who have been shamed because of their race, shamed because of their sexual orientation, shamed because of mental illness, shamed because of their immigration status... and they can't wait.

My Brothers and sisters, to know God in God's fullness is to love. There is no theological formula, no right spiritual attitude, no dogma or creed that will unveil the mystery of God.... But to practice in all urgency... kindness, justice, compassion, and empathy is to participate in the mystery of God. We don't wait for God to come upon us.... We participate in the life of God already among us.

Good people, the wait is over. The wait has forever been over. The word Advent means arrival. The Christ arrives as we speak... as Spirit, as fire. God's community of equals is emerging despite the opposition of the powerful. In that sense we are always in Advent. The life of God has been arriving since the dawn of what is, and what will be. I'm telling you this day that the kingdom of God is at hand.... No more waiting.