

So I have to tell you something about Advent that's not very popular.

Most pastors don't talk about it, which means that most churches don't talk about it (at least according to my anecdotal experience).

It's one of those Christian ideas that lost favor a long time ago, so now we kind of ignore this reality.

The truth is that the season of Advent is not only about Jesus' birth.

It's not only about angels and shepherds and an unwed young woman becoming pregnant.

Advent is also about Jesus' *second* coming.

His return.

The assigned readings for all four weeks of Advent are apocalyptic.

They're about the world ending, about Jesus returning, about the righteous ascending into heaven.

The stories are about the Earth being recreated after the destruction of this world as we know it.

The theme of preparation is not only a nostalgic remembrance of a birth that happened a few thousand years ago.

Preparation is also about getting ready for what is yet to come, Jesus returning in power and glory.

Advent actually represents the coming of Christ from three different perspectives: in the flesh in Bethlehem, as we traditionally understand the season, but also in our hearts daily and in glory at the end of time (the apocalypse).

The season offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the arrival of a Messiah, AND to be alert for when he will return again, according to the scriptures.

Now, you might be thinking that preparing for a second coming is a lot less fun than reminiscing about Jesus' birth.

Those end-of-the-world stories, like the one we heard this morning, can be scary.

But we like the story that we've told year after year that's captured our hearts and imaginations.

We like our heroic tale with its plot twists and close calls.

We hold our breath when we hear the magnificat, because Mary could've said no.

Joseph could've said no.

The innkeeper could've refused them a place to stay.

Mary or Jesus couldn't have problems during labor and delivery.

But all those perils are avoided and they live happily ever after, at least until Jesus is grown up.

That's the story we want to think about, not suffering and the sun darkening and the moon not giving light and the stars falling and the heavens being shaken.

Can you imagine what those Christmas cards would look like?!

That's the stuff horror films are made of, we don't want to think about Jesus returning at this time of year.

Or, do we not want to think about Jesus' second coming because we're afraid that we haven't done enough?

If Jesus returned today and only the faithful were able to go to heaven, would any of us go?

Well now there's something on the line, a lot more than a sweet story and a festive season.

What if we really did treat Advent like it was about Jesus returning at any moment?

Would we be ready, alert, awake?

Would we be able to explain the ways we've spent our lives, our time and our money?

That's what this lesser-known aspect of Advent is all about.

God has given us responsibility for this world, and God expects us to take good care of it.

The worst-case scenario is having nothing good to say when God asks us how we've tended to the needs of the world.

You might be thinking to yourself, man, Angela, you got heavy, I just wanted to hear a nice sermon that was a prelude to Christmas that might also put me in a festive mood.

Well, this should put you in a good mood, because the good news is that we have from this moment on to devote ourselves to bettering the world, whether in preparation for Jesus' return, or just for the sake of humanity (if you aren't into that apocalyptic stuff).

As one pastor said, *"The season of Advent is about expectation, about waiting for Christ.*

But often it seems like we are waiting only for the Jesus in the manger.

And as important as it is for us to see that the birth of the king of Israel is a humble one, Advent isn't just about waiting for the baby in the manger.

It's about expecting Christ here, in our own messed-up lives, right now [and waiting for him to return again, in glory]." (Rev. Sanders, Dennis. December 3, Advent 1B, www.ChristianCentury.org).

Now, I am not telling you to minimize the celebrations or parties or to put away the nativity set and replace it with something that looks post-apocalyptic.

But, in the midst of all the festive things we do at this time of year, we can be more attentive to the vulnerability and needs of others.

Perhaps in this way, we will be preparing for Jesus' birth, celebrating God's presence in and amongst our lives right now and making the world that much better in preparation for Jesus' return.

Now, this passage that we heard sounds like something out of the book of Revelation, but it's not, it's from the earliest Gospel, the Gospel of Mark.

It was written for the Christians who were living during the decades following Jesus' death, and it evokes images of a destroyed world because their world had been destroyed.

In 70CE, the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of religious and civic life for the Jews, was destroyed, for a second time.

They were, again, a people without a religious home.

So this passage, the "little apocalypse," as it's called, is understood as crisis literature because it's a direct address to people who were living through a crisis.

The purpose was to reassure them that the destruction of the temple wasn't the end of the world, that they had a job to do, that they had to continue to be faithful, to be vigilant, and live lives according to God's will for them, in preparation for Christ's return.

We might feel like we are living through a crisis moment as well.

We're in an unprecedented time with technology, artificial intelligence, politics, climate change, sexual assault allegations, all while seemingly on the brink of nuclear war.

And, so, whether we are preparing for Christ's birth or preparing for him to come again, the question is, what are we going to do while we wait?

Just busy ourselves with parties and presents?

No. If that's all we wanted to do, we wouldn't be part of this community, this religion which holds us accountable for our actions and holds us to a higher standard.

One of the greatest threats to justice and mercy is complacency, and our world can't afford for us to become complacent.

We can't become immune to the cries of those suffering.

We can't fall asleep, or let our oil lamps go out.

We can't miss the sign of the fig tree, whose changing leaves signal a new day.

We are called to stay vigilant by sharing the Good News of the Gospel whenever we can, by allowing our faith in something greater than ourselves to infuse all that we do, and allow it to affect our relations with other people.

This time of preparation is a blessing, it's a time to affirm our commitment to Christ by claiming our identity as Christians and to expressly live that out in our everyday lives.

Because if we believe that God is in-dwelling in our midst and all that we have is a gift from God, we have a responsibility to care for those gifts.

And if we believe every person is created in God's image, then we are to follow Jesus' call to treat others the way we'd treat Jesus, if we met him on the street.

You might not like waiting, many of us lack patience.

But if you see each moment of this in-between time, that time between now and Jesus' birth and between now and Jesus' return,

as another chance to live into our identities as Christ-followers, maybe the waiting won't be so bad.

I don't know about you, but as for me, I'll take all the opportunities I can get to align myself with Jesus and his teachings.

Amen.