

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2022

Lectionary Year A: James 5:7-10

Most early Christians thought that Christ would return within their lifetime, which might sound a bit strange to us, because here we are -- two thousand years later -- and he hasn't come back yet. But when people actually believed this, they did all sorts of strange things, the most common being severe spiritual disciplines. Because the Lord's return was imminent, it was necessary, so they thought, to deny themselves many of the basic comforts of life. In other words, you'd better not have anything corrupting you at that unexpected hour!

But you'll notice that, throughout the Advent season, our Scripture texts tend to point to the return of Christ at the end of time instead of the birth of Christ two thousand years ago. This, in fact, is a more honest approach for us, because this is precisely what we are waiting for. Christ already has been born, so the only thing for us to anticipate is Christ's return. Yet the mood is the same in both instances; we await Christ's return in exactly the same way as the watchers and prophets awaited the birth of the Messiah all those centuries ago. With that frame of mind, the coming of our Lord is an even greater, more joyful surprise, especially as it relates to Christmas.

Sometimes we need to look forward to better appreciate what's behind us, and that, in many ways, is what Advent is all about. As an example, think of the advances in the sciences that will come in the future...now, might that not

also help us appreciate the "pioneers" of this age and previous ages who'll have made those advances possible? Well, the same goes for Advent. We look forward knowing that the work of the One who will come again is built upon his having been born in Bethlehem over two millennia ago.

Yet anticipation can really test our patience. If you're roughly my age or older, you may remember a commercial for Heinz Ketchup that featured the Carly Simon song "Anticipation" -- the point being that Heinz Ketchup was so thick and rich that it would, as Carly Simon put it, "keep you waiting" as it slowly oozed out of the bottle. In the larger scope of things, we might conclude that good things often require us to wait, and that they're worth waiting for.

Interestingly, we read this morning from the epistle of James some very timely words. Let's hear them again: "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You also must be patient" (5:7-8a). Now, imagine being in James's time having to deal with all those early Christians who believed that Christ may very well return the next day. There would've been a lot of anxious and impatient waiting, one might think.

Actually, in James's case, there was a lot of lethargy and complacency, as well. Hey, if you knew that the world was coming to an end, why bother doing anything? Certainly, there was an element within James's community that thought exactly this. Thus, his appeal seems mainly to encourage preparation and anticipation (patient anticipation, mind you!) in lieu of total complacency or -- the other extreme -- getting all stirred up into one great big frenzy.

In some corners of the Church, one might find people anxiously and impatiently waiting during the season of Advent -- particularly when it comes to matters of music. They might want to hear Christmas music right after Thanksgiving. But those who know the liturgical calendar well realize that Christmas music just doesn't fit with the mood and meaning of Advent. Entirely to the opposite, we are called to turn the volume down instead of up during this season. Advent is more for introspection rather than celebration. As James reminds us, we "strengthen [our] hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near" (5:8b).

Probably the best way to look at where we are is in terms of "already" but "not yet." Yes, Christ is with us now and always -- in the Word that we preach and in the Sacrament that we eat and drink. He, in countless ways, is already here. But, until the fulfillment of all things in his Second Coming, he is (simultaneously) not yet here. And for that, the only thing we can do is wait.

It's that "already" but "not yet" paradox that is the spirit of Advent. It seems, though, that the "already" is easier to grasp than the "not yet." This may be a reason why it's so hard to resist the temptation to jump the gun every time the season of Advent rolls around. But, don't worry, the Episcopal Church will continue to boldly assert that "it's not yet Christmas" for decades to come!

And with that, too, goes the assertion that we believe in a Christ who came into the world not only to look cute in a Nativity scene; no, we also believe in a Christ who "will come again to judge the living and the dead" (Apostles' Creed, second article). And even though the Second Coming may be a long, long ways away, this "not yet" Christ can be as close to us as the chair we're sit-

ting in, or as James says in today's text: "See, the Judge is standing at the doors!" (5:9b).

The best Advent illustration from my own life that I can think of dates back to when I was a kid in Drayton, North Dakota. It was 1977, and my babysitter had brought out this huge box with my Christmas gift in it. I don't know how many square feet (or yards) of wrapping paper it took to cover the whole thing! As I recall, we used an old-style sled to transport it through the snow over to my parents' house, and we pulled it ourselves. And that huge box stayed there -- by the Christmas tree -- at our house, baffling all of us completely as to what its contents were. (I was four years old at the time, so you can about imagine the agony of anticipation that I suffered!)

But as with all Christmases, I survived just fine until Christmas Eve, December 24th, 1977, when I finally got to open my huge present. As a sidebar, I'm guessing you're now all wondering what it was. You probably won't be surprised to find out that it was a handmade garage for all my toy cars, trucks, tractors, and machinery. (Some things never change...)

I hope you can see, though, from this illustration that Advent is like that huge Christmas present by the tree that stays there, unopened, until the appropriate time, except that this "present" contains not a handmade garage, but rather the Christ child.

Remember..."already" but "not yet."

And it is good, too, that we have four Sundays leading up to the big day; our patience during the Advent season can only make our celebration of Christmas

all the more magnificent! In our text, James gives us a rather inappropriate-for-winter-weather image, but one that still bears repeating; he writes, "The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains" (5:7b). Now, we don't see a lot of growth happening in the soil around this time of year, but I think we can still understand James's point. You can't pluck up what was planted until it's time. Yes, the fruit is surely on its way, but you have to wait for it...wait for it with patience, care, and respect.

Where the early Christians were, as it turned out, wrong about the timing of the Second Coming, many contemporary Christians have been wrong about -- or at least have misunderstood -- the season of Advent. But being "wrong" isn't as irreversibly and unforgivably bad as one might think! James, for example, can offer a word of correction and by that one possesses a great and glorious hope...the hope that one can change. Any teacher, preacher, or evangelist within the whole of Christian history is only good if he or she sees the good in his or her people. And when we read these ancient letters -- like James -- we see someone who's making a decent attempt at lifting up the good in his people and pulling it out of them. Were they not capable of being patient, I don't think he'd have even bothered telling them to be patient.

So remember that it is in neither complacency or frenzy that we anticipate our Lord's coming...whether it be his birth at Christmas or his glorious return at the end of time. Rather, we wait for these "advents" with the patience, care, and respect of a farmer awaiting the maturity of his crop or, to a lesser extent, a four-year-old waiting to open that huge present back in 1977. Waiting

can teach us a lot; it can teach us to listen, look inward, and prepare our hearts and minds for the One who is to come. Thus, James says, "Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near..."

Amen.