

The King Is Coming!
November 30, 2003
First Sunday of Advent
Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

What time is it? That's a rather common question. It's the right question for the season of Advent.

I have an acquaintance, a pastor, who was finishing visiting church members in the hospitals of his community. He was in the last hospital and just finished visiting his last member. He was hurrying down the hall heading back to his office where he had a pressing appointment.

A patient stopped him in the hall. Sir, she said tugging on his sleeve, Do you have the time? To his regret he told her the truth, No, ma'am. I don't have time, and rushed on past her.

It's that time of the year where we don't have much time. The pace of life is increasing as our lives lean toward Christmas. The pressure of the season is increasing as obligations mount and time passes — quickly. Often, this time of year, we say to ourselves, Time's a wastin'.

Time is always precious. Time is a non-renewable resource. Each moment, each event, is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. Once gone it never returns. Time is of the essence.

During the Christmas time seems even more precious. Time passes faster. We want to shout, Time out! We want to slow things down, preserve these precious memories. And, too often, by season's end we're exhausted and the entire month of December is a dim blur in our memory — gone forever.

The church wants to help us make time. Long ago, our spiritual ancestors realized that becoming a mature Christian takes time. It takes a lifetime to produce a saint. And along the way it takes time, special seasons devoted to our souls. Being a Christian takes time.

So, the church created its own calendar to mark time in a new way. This new Christian calendar organizes time around the life of Jesus Christ. It's a new way to live in time and it's an alternative to life in regular time. The church calendar reminds us that time does not belong to us and is not ours to waste. Time belongs to God.

Advent marks the beginning of the church year — the beginning of what we believe is real time. Today is the first day of the new church year — it's New Year's Day! Advent is always the four Sundays preceding Christmas day. During this period of time we learn something about time. We will spend the next 24 days waiting — in time — for The Time, Christmas and the birth of Christ. We'll be passing time creatively and purposefully. And, we believe, this time of our life, will do something in us and to us.

Advent interrupts ordinary time. In Advent God invades our time and says to us, Take your time. Make time. Or, as the Apostle Paul puts it, Redeem the time. So, I say, let's use this time for our souls.

The problem is that Advent happens during time called The Christmas Season. We're supposed to be taking our time and making time while our whole world is speeding up time and distorting our time.

Another problem: the Scripture Lessons the church assigns us during Advent are not texts I'd choose — I don't think you would either. We need help redeeming this time of the year and what we get are texts that seem quite remote and utterly impractical.

If it were up to me, I'd search Scripture for some texts about time, or about the true Christmas spirit. Certainly we could find more relevant lessons to study.

In particular, I've never been happy that the Scripture lessons for the First Sunday of Advent are always about the Second Coming of Christ. And the Gospel lesson includes highly figurative language that is very difficult to understand and is more difficult to communicate to folks like us.

Or, to put it another way, the First Sunday of Advent is about the future — that time a comin' that is very much out of our control. These 24 days of Advent belong to us. We can do something about this time. But the Second Coming, now that's an event completely out of our control. We want help for our time here and now and what we get is a dream about the future. We don't want to wait!

Then it doesn't help that these days there's an entire industry devoted to the Second Coming of Christ. Best selling books, seminars and now movies lead some Christians to an unhealthy preoccupation with the end of time. And far too often that preoccupation leads to disengagement with the world here and now while waiting for the sweet bye and bye.

That is, mind you, the very opposite of Jesus' life and teaching. Jesus' dream for the world, a vision given him by God, is all about engagement in and with our world. The Kingdom of God redeems this very world through a people, the church, who are committed to repairing God's broken world.

Nevertheless, year after year, these texts come back to speak to us. It's an annual reminder, like it or not, of a basic fact of the Christian faith. That is, what Jesus began 2,000 years ago is not finished. And, Jesus will come back to finish what he began. Like our Old Testament lesson promises, God will come to recreate the world. God's new world will be free of evil and brimming with justice, righteousness and peace. God will completely repair this broken world — after all, it's God's world!

So, in light of that promise, our Epistle lesson exhorts us to get ready for that day. Be blameless at Christ's coming in the way Paul puts it. There's more work to be done in us so get at it. There's more work to be done in the world, prepare for it.

Advent is a season for getting ready — getting ready for Jesus Christ. He has come. He will come. In the meantime, prepare yourself for Jesus' coming.

For four Sundays we'll see, hear and smell a slightly different Meetinghouse. We've decorated it anticipating Christ's coming. We're practicing for the Second Coming! So, get ready.

These 24 days, we're reordering our time with a view to ordering our lives. The king is coming. Get ready! Redeem this time — for the sake of God and your own soul.

That means we have to make time. If this time will have power in us we have to create space in our lives and homes (and workplace). We need rituals that help this time become God's time for us.

That's because it takes time to re-order our lives according to the gospel. If we are to be blameless at his coming we have to make changes. Turn off the TV. Say no. Stay home. Go to church. Slow down. Go to the Center for Spiritual Formation. Redeem the time.

Perhaps above all, we need to restrain ourselves and not enter into the pagan ritual of consumerism that's swallowed Christmas. Redeem the time.

This season, be open to word and sacrament. You never know what a single word or simple gesture might do to your soul and your faith.

If the biblical exhortation about Jesus' return and God's re-ordered world requires us to work toward blamelessness, I ask you:

- What one area of your life needs work this Advent?
- What one act of service can you offer to repair God's broken world — in anticipation of God's final repair?
- What can you give to Christ the King this Advent? Your life?

One last thing: may Christ be formed in you!