

St James United Church



Message for November 30, 2025

First Sunday in Advent

“Waiting on Christmas” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-33; “Longing” by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Here we are in the season of Advent. Not yet Christmas, despite the Christmas Parade starting in less than an hour, the Mummer’s Festival kicking off this weekend, the holiday music playing in stores to get us in a shopping mood, my house soon to be decked out over the next two days. It’s Advent: a time of spiritual preparation for the season that is not yet here; a time of intentional waiting, and not just for presents and a festive meal; but a reflective time that’s become counter-cultural, a prayerful antidote to the busy merry-making that we associate with the holiday season.

Little underscores this more than the gospel reading assigned to this first of four Sundays. It doesn’t point us toward Jesus’ birth, as you might expect if this was your first Advent, but is set in the lead up to Jesus’ death as he speaks of a time beyond that, pointing to his return at the end of the age. The language isn’t hopeful at first, certainly not as Jesus speaks of the days of Noah when the flood came without warning for most people, and then he makes it more personal as he describes a few scenarios where one is taken and the other is left. This isn’t the “Left Behind” movie, even as Jesus speaks of the Son of Man coming in glory to gather the elect. The rapture wasn’t part of his theology, wasn’t part of anyone’s until last century. Given his speaking earlier in this chapter about wars and rumours of wars, the context was the socio-political conflict that beset the culture of his time. Being left behind could be what you hoped for, not the other way around, the one taken not by angels but soldiers, think ICE agents in our contemporary context.

That sounds scary, decidedly not Christmassy. At least not contemporary Christmassy. But think about the context of that first Christmas over two thousand years ago. Jesus’ birth was beset by conflict, violence and unrest whether we read the description found in Luke’s gospel, as Jesus’ parents were forced to relocate from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a census called for by the dictator of the time; or Matthew’s version where the tyrant king of the region was so afraid of news of a competitor to the throne he ordered the slaughter of all the male infants in Bethlehem, forcing Jesus’ parents to relocate, this time to Egypt. Both of these narratives remind us of the hardships and crises of those times, ones not all that removed from what we face in ours.

And that is the reason that Jesus is born. Not just his birth, but the whole of his life was framed by oppression and injustice. His was not a time of peace and caring, at least not the peace we associate with him. There was a Pax Romana but it was gained through war and ongoing military occupation that rewarded those willing to oppress their fellow citizens, to accept the takeover of their country to accrue personal wealth and power. And so following the opening story of Jesus’

birth, we hear him calling people back to the way of God, to change not only their hearts but how they lived, to align with God's call for a cooperative, rather than cooptive society, where people took care of each other, especially the most vulnerable among them. Jesus' challenging of the coopted leaders is what led him to the cross, and so, as we heard, to warn his followers of what was coming in their future. But he did this as he also invited them to continue in his mission and so to reshape their culture. This is where the hope lies in our readings. In the gospel Jesus says that one would be taken and one would be left. Rather than it be an angel that takes one in the field or grinding grain, perhaps the angel guards one from being taken, that one given a purpose, to live out of the presence of the Son of Man within them, their return not just in the future but made known through the Spirit giving them the conviction and courage they needed to continue what Jesus started, and to do so not only by teaching God's way but modelling it.

So, what is this way, this teaching that we are to model? I feel that it's framed well in what we'll celebrate in four weeks at Christmas. On that day we celebrate that God loves us, loves the world, loves all of creation, so much that they draw near to us in Jesus, affirming the sanctity of all life, affirming that any of us, all of us, are connecting points with the divine. This is the core of the vision that Isaiah describes as the implements of war are turned into tools of growth and creativity and all the nations joined as one. This is God's dream for us, God inviting us again and again to reach for that vision. This is why Jesus was born. God enters into our story not to rescue us from the world but invite us to enter it more deeply, to experience it, every part of it, as holy. Jesus invites us to be awake to this, to recognize the coming of the Son of Man not just within us but in those around us. When we see each other that way, there can be peace.

But as we know, we struggle to get there, not just in the past with Roman soldiers occupying the land of Jesus' birth, or now with ICE agents or national guard soldiers or people who shoot them, but in the future too in whatever soldier or agent comes next. No wonder that Isaiah feels pie in the sky, always beyond reach. But that is the point. It is out of reach without God. The passage is likely not original to Isaiah but was added to his text to balance his initial prophecies of coming judgment. It echoes a similar verse in Micah. Both are likely from a third source, a poetic text used in worship, a reminder that it takes grace for us to get to a time of peace, takes God's help to change our hearts and how we live, to be counter-cultural given the culture in which we live.

Which brings us back to our need for Advent, a time to spiritually prepare not just for Christmas but to embody all that it signifies. So I invite you to be counter-cultural and slow down if you can this season, to pause, pray, perhaps to put up your own Advent wreath and light a candle each evening, asking God to prepare your heart to receive Christ, to help you see Christ in others, even the person who cuts you off in the parking lot or sings carols off key, or grabs the last turkey, to experience God's loving presence drawing near. It is not yet Christmas, not as a day, nor a way of seeing each other in the world. But it is coming, as we open ourselves to all that it means, as we await the advent of Christ in our hearts and in our lives. Amen.