

## SERMON: ADVENT SUNDAY 2012

Jer 33: 14-16  
Ps 25: 1-10  
1 Thess 3: 9-13  
Luke 21: 25-38

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God. Amen.

Be on guard! Be alert! God is coming! The time is almost here! Advent is here, bringing with it a sense of urgency. We really don't have much time left in which to get our act together. God is just around the corner. As the fridge magnet says, 'Look busy, Jesus is coming'.

This is the message that comes loudly and clearly from today's readings. But all this urgency sits a little oddly. It's hard to maintain a sense of imminent arrival for 2,000 years. And, you could argue that God is already here and has been for quite some time now.

It is true that the urgency and pressure of the Advent readings are a reminder to us to be attentive to our spiritual lives, to live mindfully day by day. But if we haven't worked that out by now, then we haven't been listening to the constant message of the Scriptures and another few readings telling us to do it probably won't make that much difference.

There is also a threat implicit in the Gospel reading – a threat that is somewhat disconcerting and, dare I suggest it, irritating. It almost seems to imply that we should be good because God will catch us out if we aren't - a school room sort of image where the students muck up until the teacher comes. "Ssh, God's coming! You'll get a detention if she catches you!" "Outer darkness for you, you naughty child!"

Is that really why we seek to lead godly lives – because of what will happen to us if we don't? Is goodness an option we reluctantly take because of the consequences of behaving badly? The motive for seeking to live in harmony with God is surely more positive than that. It is to do with the intrinsic merit and joy of living in that way.

However, despite the difficulty of these texts for those of us who live two millennia away from the birth of Jesus, there is also within them a wonderful sense of the surprising, utterly unexpected intrusion of God into the everyday. Whatever we do, however we construct the world, whatever our expectations might be, God is God and will shake us, confound us, and challenge us. God is so much more than we can conceive that all our attempts to systematise, to understand, to contain, crumble in front of a single flower, or the experience of love.

God speaks and acts when God wants to speak and act. No amount of orderliness can mask the wildness and unpredictability of God's words and actions. Nor does God necessarily choose the channels we expect. Not all divine messengers come equipped with the give-away wings, haloes and golden aura of the classic angel. We cannot contain God, we cannot demand God respond in certain ways or through particular people, we cannot predict how God might act. There is an unsettling beauty, a wild otherness that always remains beyond our knowing.

Which is not to say that we should give up on trying to know God, to draw closer in worship, prayer and study. There is much to be gained from an orderly spiritual life – a regular discipline of prayer, study, worship, spiritual direction. As one of the two seasons of repentance in our church year, Advent is a good time to be intentional in our spiritual life and to ask ourselves some fundamental questions: what nurtures my spirit? How best do I connect with the voice of God within me? It could be regular daily prayer at a fixed time, or the reading of the scriptures and other devotional books, or walking and praying, or sitting quietly on the beach or in the bush. Or any combination of these. Or indeed, something completely different.

But the question is an intensely personal one and the answer will be intensely personal. There are many tools in the spiritual toolkit and I have just listed some of them. Not all of them will suit all of us. Some will be good at certain times in our lives, others will never fit our particular temperaments.

A habit of spiritual nurture, of prayer, of reading, of contemplation – whatever you choose – set in place over the weeks of Advent can be the basis of a continuing practice throughout the year, tilling the soil of our hearts so the seed of God's presence can flourish.

But we should never expect to keep God to such orderly habits. We may set aside 6.30 to 6.45am for a prayer time, but God will almost certainly have things to say at different times and will not necessarily choose the messengers we can instantly recognise. Indeed, the messengers themselves may not have any idea that God has used them in that way.

God also breaks into our lives in many forms, not just by means of other people. We can be brought up short by music, literature, art. We can be deeply challenged by poverty, drug addiction, illness. World events, family joy or tragedy can all lead us to look beyond our normal frameworks and seek a deeper understanding of ultimate truth.

The challenge of Advent, of this time of hopeful waiting, is to be open to God, wherever and whenever God chooses to be present to us. We know that God will be in unexpected places, speaking disturbing, confronting words – can we hear them? Can we go there too? Can we set aside our preconceptions, our fears, our systems and listen to the wind of the Spirit?

As we wait and prepare for the joyful celebration of God's birth as one of us, perhaps, just perhaps, God is calling us to re-frame our understandings: to see the humour of our failures, the guilt of our successes, the pain of our victories and the joy of our defeats. Amen.

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