

FOCUS: The Good News is that even as we await celebrating the birth of the Christ Child, we await with patience the coming again of our Lord and Savior. (First in a series)

It's coming. Faster than we might expect, it's coming. Not as quickly as we might like, it's coming. Just a short period of time, and it will be here. Anticipation. Excitement. Nervousness, even. But, it is coming.

Yes, dear sisters and brothers, the birth of Laura Kalshoven's third child approaches. And we rejoice with Laura and Jan and their entire family. These are exciting times for them. They have been waiting months for this day. And, at least as of right now, they are still waiting.

In anticipation of the birth of a child, we can find a great lesson about this season of the church year, as well. The season of Advent is a time of anticipation, waiting, and hoping. It is also a time of activity, excitement, and nervousness. For centuries, the church has used the season of Advent as a time to prepare for the birth of the Christ Child. In the course of four Sundays, we transition our thoughts and minds from the end of the Pentecost season and its message of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to the celebration of the first coming of Jesus—his most humble birth in the city of David—Bethlehem—some two thousand years ago. In the season of Advent, we look forward to the coming of the Light of the world, but at the same time, we anxiously try to balance the eagerness to celebrate the birth with the waiting necessary to get to that day. The time is now, but not yet.

And the secular world around us doesn't make it easy to wait. For weeks, even months, the stores in the malls have been transformed into decoration-filled halls and caverns of the commercial side of Christmas. Red and green ribbons, light-filled trees, hundreds of wrapped—but empty—boxes, and, of course, the presence of an ageless gentleman described by some as a "jolly old elf." The music of Christmas fills the air. One local radio station has become "all Christmas, all the time," or very nearly so. "Buy now and save!" the advertisements tell us. "Help the economy in the spirit of Christmas" the economists and politicians shout. The din is overwhelming. It's enough to make a grown man want to shout "Enough!"

For Laura, and I'm sure for Jan and the girls, but Laura especially, there is an eagerness for "*now*," even though she's well aware that she is at the time of "*not yet*." The preparations continue in the household, even as everything seems to be ready. These are days of anxious anticipation for that which is to come. Anxiousness not only over the birth of a child, but also anxiousness over what the future will hold.

One difference between the church and the world is that in the church, as counter-cultural as it might be, we are bold to declare this is a time of "Now, but not yet." Yes, in keeping with the ages-old tradition of "greening the church" during the wintertime—something that doesn't seem so necessary this year, with the warm temperatures and premature bursting of spring flowers—we have placed the wreaths in the windows, adorned by the blue ribbons of Advent—a sign of anticipation and hope. We lit but a single candle on the Advent wreath, and over the next four Sundays, will watch the beeswax melt, declaring the passage of time, the days of anticipation and expectation.

We hear the words of the prophet Isaiah declaring to the people "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" and "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"¹ Isaiah prophesies that the day of the Lord is coming. That day is not yet here, but it is coming to be sure. In the midst of the turmoil of war among the nations, Isaiah reminds the people that it is God, not human beings, who shall be the judge. Isaiah's message is one of peace, but not an immediate, known-

¹ Isaiah 2:3, 5 (NRSV)

point-in-time kind of peace, but a peace that will come *at some time* to be determined by the Lord God. *Now* the Lord is with us, indeed, but the Lord is *not yet* present as the Lord of all peoples and *not yet* do all the peoples walk in the light and goodness of God.

While we know the place and time of the birth of Jesus, we do not know the place and time of the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus told the disciples, as we heard in our Gospel this morning, that “neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son”² know the day and hour when it will happen. But, this should not be our concern. Rather, we should rejoice as we wait patiently and anticipate that day, for it will certainly come. *Now* we live as best we are able as children of God in a world in which all people are *not yet* ready, or able, so to live.

Jesus tells the disciples that they need to be ready, for the hour of the coming of the Son of Man is unknown, but it is expected. We, too, need to make ourselves ready, even as we go about our daily lives.

How might we prepare ourselves? Well, that’s the question people have been asking for millennia. The course of human history shows many who have led people as they have prepared for the end times. Since the Day of Pentecost, some people have tried to predict the time of the coming of the Son of Man. Some have withdrawn from society in order to be ready. These actions, my friends, are unnecessary.

Jesus reminds us to “stay awake.” This doesn’t mean that we should not sleep, nor should we withdraw from society in order to stand together on shifts, some resting while others stand watch. Rather, we need to stay awake spiritually. We need to live Godly lives. We need to live out our baptism, and daily remind ourselves that we are children of God and coheirs with Christ, chosen by God as His own. As we wait with patience and anticipation for the coming of the Son of Man, we can prepare ourselves by giving thanks to God each day as we awake.

Martin Luther’s recommendation for preparing oneself for the day was to “make the sign of the Holy Cross” in remembrance of one’s baptism, to offer a prayer, say the Creed, and begin the day cheerfully. Spend the day attentive to the vocation to which God has called you—as student or parent, teacher or civil servant, grandparent or housekeeper. Seek out the role of God in your life as you live your faith daily. At night, as you prepare for a good night’s rest, end the day as it began, making the sign of the cross, offering a prayer of thanksgiving, and offer up to God that which has troubled you most during the day, trusting God to take that care as His own.

Come to the Table as often as you can. Receive the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior. In the bread and wine receive a visible sign of God’s grace, freely given to you and to all people for the forgiveness of sin.

Dear sisters and brothers, there is no simple answer as to how to prepare for the coming of the Lord. It’s hard enough for many of us to prepare *now* for the next day, let alone for that which we know, expect, and anticipate, but are uncertain as to when.

Stay awake. Anticipate the coming of the Lord. Be patient as you keep watch. Do not rush the coming of the birth of the Christ Child, either. Use these next weeks as a time to prepare for that holy event. Do not wander in darkness, dear friends, but come, and let us walk in the light of the Lord together as we prepare ourselves for the coming of the Light of the world.

² Matthew 24:36 (NRSV)