

FOCUS: The Good News is Christ is coming even as we wait for him.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One year ago, as we were gathered here, we gathered in an state of anticipation. Anticipation for the Nativity of Our Lord, of course. But also, as I looked back on my notes from last Advent, the birth of Jason Kalshoven. It was an anxious time for a lot of us, but, thanks be to God, Jason was born strong and healthy, and he continues to grow in leaps and bounds. We pray that he continues to grow up and older—although maybe not so fast that he outgrows clothes before he wears them out!

Whether it's Jason or any other child, we anticipate a lot about the child's growing older. We anticipate birthdays and graduations, weddings and all that comes with children growing up. Anticipation is, after all, one of the joys—and one of the challenges—of being a parent or a grandparent. Anticipation for major events—birthdays, Thanksgiving, Christmas—is one of the joys of being a child. The season of Advent is one of anticipation as well.

In fact, Advent is a season that is hard to enjoy as a season, especially when the world outside of the church has already leaped with both feet into Christmas. The commercialism of the holiday season seems to sweep us away from a time of prayer, contemplation, and anticipation that the season of Advent really deserves—even demands. We want to enjoy these next 24 days with lots of happy music, candy canes, homemade cookies and fudge, and all that goes with the holiday season. To prepare ourselves for the festive season of Christmas, we come to church to hear the Good News proclaimed, to be to enjoy these next 24 days with lots of happy music, candy canes, homemade cookies and fudge, and all that goes with the holiday season. To prepare ourselves for the festive season of Christmas, we come to church to hear the Good News proclaimed, to be lifted up, to enjoy exciting liturgy and music...

And we hear the words of Isaiah, Paul, and Mark this morning and get the wind knocked out of us. What in the world is going on here with the lectionary? Why are we focusing, yet again, after all those weeks at the end of Pentecost, on the coming of the day of the Lord, the Second Coming of Christ? Isn't this the time during which we prepare for the first coming? We're anticipating a birth, yet we hear these last words of Jesus to his disciples and the call to "keep awake" for the return of Christ.

In this final discourse of Jesus, which Mark, as is his style, keeps brief compared to the other writers of the synoptic Gospels—Matthew and Mark—we hear Jesus tell about a time to come when there will be suffering. We hear of a time when the sun will be darkened and the moon, not having the sun to cast its light onto the moon's surface, will be dark as well. The stars will

fall from the heavens in a way that will make last month's meteor shower look like a sparkler compared to the fireworks on the Mall at the Fourth of July. This doesn't sound like an Advent text at all. It sounds more like an apocalyptic text—one that is designed to prepare us for the end of the world, and not for the birth of an innocent child.

I suggest to you that this is exactly the point that we are supposed to get from these lessons this morning. We are preparing to celebrate the coming of the Christ Child. The world was forever changed some 2,000 years ago when Mary and Joseph went into that stinking stable in Bethlehem to get shelter from the cold and dark so Mary could deliver their child. While the rest of the world was sleeping snug and comfortably in their beds, God entered into the world in the form of a human being—a tiny child known as Jesus. No one knew what was happening, except for Mary and Joseph.

Thirty-some years later, Jesus tells the disciples that they have to keep alert. That message was true then just as it is today. We have no idea when the Son of Man will come again. The disciples assumed it was going to be in their own lifetimes. Luther was convinced that it would come during his lifetime. Countless others have announced the Second Coming during our lifetimes, especially as we approached the start of the third millennium. And guess what...they were all wrong, too. We have an indication of that will happen when the Reign of Christ begins, but we are not privy to the timing of it. It's just not something we need to worry about.

So, then, dear sisters and brothers, what are we to do? What are we called to do to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ? We are the servants of the Master, and we have been told to tend to things while the Master is gone. There is a doorkeeper who will wait and watch for the Master's return, and when the Master returns, the doorkeeper will sound the alarm and let us know that the time is at hand.

Until that time, our responsibility is to be alert and do that which we have been called to do. We don't need to act like college students, staying up all night to prepare for the "final exam." But we do need to stay awake in our faith, always at the ready for the coming of Christ. We need to stay awake in our faith and do that for which we have been chosen. We are awake in our faith when we proclaim the Gospel to all nations. We are awake in our faith when we share the Good News of Jesus Christ with our neighbors, friends, and most especially with strangers who have not yet heard the Good News. We are awake in our faith when we baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are awake in our faith when we come to the Table and share in the visible sign of God's grace and love for us—the Holy Eucharist.

We are awake in our faith while we wait with patience and prepare ourselves for the coming of the one who was born to be Master. Don't rush the preparation. Be awake, but don't be in a hurry. Thanks be to God.