

Here we are, in the season of Advent. It is the beginning of a new year by the church's reckoning. This Sunday starts us on another cycle of study and worship as the great acts of God through his Son Jesus Christ are rehearsed. We are once again drawn into the great drama of salvation, God's awe-inspiring descent lower and lower and then triumph and ascent back to glory

And in this first season of the year, we are invited to prepare for and anticipate this wonderful story. Whereas most of the world has decided Christmas is already upon us, let us celebrate! The church says, not yet, let us anticipate.

We find ourselves, as the church, in that very strange in-between time – sometimes described as “already but not yet”. We are not, as the children of Israel awaiting a promised Messiah, who will defeat our enemies and establish the Kingdom of God. For in Christ the promised Kingdom of God was established. The prophecies, such as Isaiah 35, were fulfilled: “Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.” These things were accomplished by Christ. However, we do yet await the final consummation of the God's kingdom. There is to be a second coming, and a final judgement and a new heavens and new earth.

In the words of the author of Hebrews, “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death” Christ is glorified, having defeated sin and death, yet we do not now see everything in subjection to Him.

Or as St. John says in his first epistle, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.”

And so the Christian lives in this intermediate place. One of glory and celebration, but also anticipation for what will be.

However, the world, as a rule, has no interest in anticipation. The great ambition of technological and societal “progress” seems to be the elimination of any need for waiting. The space between wanting and having is shrinking more and more. Our shopping is faster, our entertainment is immediate, social media makes people always available, and in every commercial we are told that we should not content ourselves with any dissatisfaction. Celebrate forever and always, seems to be the world’s vision of the good life. In this context it seems inevitable that Christmas would begin as soon as Halloween ends. No one should be asked to wait.

But this is not the call of the Christian. Paul wrote in Romans, “even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.” The importance of anticipation and hope was something which C. S. Lewis also wrote about.

Lewis proposed that true Joy comes from anticipation. He wrote, there is “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure.” He is talking about the anticipation of eternity, and the longing for God. This yearning for spiritual life and union with the divine is the foundation of Joy in the Christian life. To skip over anticipation would do serious harm to our ability to live joyfully as Christians.

This is why we are given the great gift of the season of Advent. In it, we are instructed to prepare ourselves for the great festival of Christmas remembering the incarnation of God, but also to orient our minds towards the second coming of Christ in glory, as well as the present coming of Christ in communion. In these three advents all of time, past, present and future, is incorporated into the Christian life. We are invited to look back at the Advent of Christ in Bethlehem as a baby born of a virgin. We must also look to the future coming of Christ to establish the new heavens and new earth. Finally, Christ comes to us even now in this sacrament of the altar, to strengthen and encourage us in our waiting.

Our fasting is a participation in the already but not yet reality of the Christian life. We put away from ourselves some pleasurable thing, not because it is bad, but because we are reminding ourselves to anticipate heaven.

There is tendency in our fasting to give up something of which we are ashamed or repentant. We take advantage of the fast to abstain from some practice which we believe is harmful. Media or alcohol are common examples. This is a good idea and a worthy practice. However, it is also valuable to abstain from something not because you wish to cut it out of your life, but because you want it to once again be a mechanism of worship. It is good to fast from something that you will take up again in the feast with joy and gratitude. This is why we are encouraged to fast from meat during lent. Not because meat is a bad thing which we should desire less. But because in putting it aside, we remind ourselves that we are waiting for a heavenly reward and heavenly satisfactions. And so that when we return to eating meat in the Easter feast, it is a reminder of the great blessing and generosity of God. It is not taken for granted.

This is the anticipatory aspect of our fasting. We fast to help ourselves look forward with eagerness, not merely to the Christmas feast, but to the Heavenly feast which will be ours in eternity. The call of the season of Advent, is a call to prepare. As Paul says, "it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light."

This phrase that Paul uses, "cast off the works of darkness", is taken up by our collect. We pray that God would strengthen us to cast off the works of darkness. What are "the works of darkness?" Evidently such works as done in darkness, i. e. wicked works. For as our Lord says in another place, "Every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd." The world is content to live in darkness. We might recall the words of John 1, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." The coming of Christ is the coming of the light, the day star. The world failed to understand and embrace the light of Christ because it did not desire the light. To be ready for Christ is to be ready for life in the light. If we live our lives as those who live in darkness how will we respond when the day comes? We will cower, hide away, as Adam and Eve did at the coming of God into the garden. But what if we have prepared ourselves for his coming? What if we, like the faithful virgins in Christ's parable have filled our lamps with oil and watched for the bride-groom? Then we will be welcomed into the wedding feast of the Kingdom of God.

And each Sunday we are brought into that heavenly feast as we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. We see now through a glass dimly, only able to perceive the Bread and Wine, only able see the priest, only able to hear the words of the gospel read. Yet, in truth all these things are also Christ. It is Christ who we receive, Christ who offers us himself, Christ who is the Word made flesh. This is why we do not fast on Sundays. Because Sundays we participate in the already portion of the already but not yet Christian life. The Kingdom of God is here even now. And soon we will see face-to-face what great glories God is preparing.

For this reason we don the armor of light. As those who are called awake in the morning, begin to dress themselves in preparation for the day, we must also dress ourselves. The garments of light are the garments appropriate for life in the light, and the garments are called armor, because our condition is warfare. For we still struggle with sin and death, not because they have any chance of winning against God, but because those who now walk in darkness may be shown the light and brought in.

Let us not spend this advent as the moneychangers in the temple had – looking to maximize their own possessions. Christ found them exploiting one another for the sake of their earthly treasures. I fear so often this is what Christ sees on Christmas morning. His people have not prepared themselves for his coming by prayer and fasting. They spent the weeks leading up to the memorial of his incarnation obsessing over what they might get out of the Holiday. How many gifts, how many cookies, how much gratitude from others for my gifts, how much rest can I get out of this special time and the people around me. Yet each of our bodies is a temple unto the Lord, which is to say each of us is to be a house of prayer. Will our Lord find us so when he comes? Be diligent and steadfast therefore. Anticipate a greater thing than this world can offer. Look for the true Joy of the Lord. And receive comfort and courage for this work in the coming of our Lord to us today in this house at his table.