

**Sermon at St. Andrew's Church
Advent I (A) – November 27, 2022
by the Rev. Connie Jones**

Matthew 24:36-44

Here's a guess: One of our beautiful children this morning,
as Advent wreath-making gets [got] underway and the holly berries fly through the air,
says, I can't wait for Christmas!

Another guess. One adult will say to another, "I can't wait for our new rector to come."

Welcome to Advent. The time for anticipation.

The time for waiting in the dark..... For yes, *hoping* in the dark.

But hold on! Commerce and popular culture have stepped in to help us!

Advent calendars have hit the big time!

The few you could choose from when my kids were little,
if you could find one at all,

had 25 tiny windows with Scripture readings about the coming of Jesus.

Those are hard to find now.

These days behind the numbered flaps you'll find pictures of toys,
or brightly wrapped bits of chocolate.

& Heaven help us, there are Advent calendars with tiny bottles of liquor behind the doors.

I shudder to think: what if commerce ever gets its hands on Lent?

But let's admit it: waiting is hard not only for kids, but for all of us.

It can hurt.

Think of waiting in an airport,

or sitting in a paper outfit on a cold examining room table, waiting for the doctor.

Imagine the days before your sweetheart is home from deployment,
or till the letter ruling on your application arrives.

I wonder how long we will have to wait

for the meanness and deceit and the fear of random gun violence in our nation to end?

Waiting can be excruciating.

Which literally means, like being on the Cross.

But Advent teaches us that waiting is never time to waste.

Consider Mary, who has nine months to *ponder*, as the Bible puts it,
how her life has been claimed,

and what work the Holy Spirit is doing since the angel's visit.

In fact, waiting time seems to be when the Holy Spirit loves
to make a move, or shake things up. Shake *us* up.
It would be a mistake to grit our teeth and distract ourselves while we wait.
Or spoil the time with anxiety or a frantic effort to avoid or shorten it.
A *big* mistake not to *pay attention* to the Spirit.

The Bible is chock full of people waiting.
The Jews for the Exodus, for a return from exile, for the Messiah.
The psalms and the prophets cry out for God to come quickly,
to console the righteous and punish the wicked.
The whole church prays for Jesus to come again.
Perhaps waiting is most filled with urgency
when humans learn – as if it were a new thing – that only God can save them.

But again and again God says, watch.....be ready.....
For when God comes, many will be surprised –
will think it's like a “bolt from the blue” –
as if God arrived on a rocket from outer space.

But those who are prepared will recognize the arrival
as the One who *has been with us all along*.
Whose birth comes in the midst of discord and despair
and whose dying turns into victory over death.

So, what shall we do to be ready?
What does it mean to keep oil in our lamps?
Well, you already know the answer. It's not a secret recipe.
We say our prayers, and act as we pray – and its corollary:
love is always the answer.
If fear creeps up on us and breathing deeply isn't enough,
when the waiting feels unbearable, we can begin to *sing!*
(I have it on good authority that the devil *hates* music.¹
And Evil does not know how to sing!)

Now here's a possibility, you could write your own psalm or poem.
And definitely you should tell the Jesus story in your own words to a child, or to yourself
because deep in your bones you *know* the story of God's goodness.
Or.....because it just *can't* be a coincidence that Thanksgiving and Advent collide –
you could begin keeping a gratitude journal. One “thank you” a day.
You could make a habit of thanking people for doing their job well,
You could say prayer for the person who'll become our new rector,

whose name you don't even know.

Here's an idea: you could make a detailed list of everybody you have a grievance against, and then burn the list.

Try watching the news, then turning it off and praying for somebody you learned about. Definitely this week for the people who died in Walmart in Chesapeake, & their families. Also, if you can, for the shooter, and all young men so broken they consider doing such terrible things. Pray for an end to hatred and discord, and that you may never practice those things yourself.

Then, I think, turn on some Christmas music
string lots of lights in the darkest corner of the room or your yard,
and leave them up way past Christmas.

And above all, shower time and attention and love
on the people in your life, the person next to you in the pew,
even the strangers you encounter during your day.

Let your waiting be a blessing to others.

Right now, as we near the year's end in dark days,
I have a true story for you from another time filled with evil and portent:

At Christmas, 1939 in England, things were very dark and very uncertain.
Hitler had invaded and occupied Poland in a *Blitzkrieg* – a lightning strike.
England declared war on Germany, but then.....
there was a pause for months, a terrible waiting.
Where would this evil aggressor strike next – at England?
Would an alliance against the Nazis do anything at all?

King George VI felt a grave responsibility to reassure the English people
in his live Christmas radio address, which had become a yearly tradition.
Would the stammer that sometimes affected his speech
betray his own fright and uncertainty in this waiting time?
It is said that his 13-year old daughter Elizabeth
(who later became Queen until her death just this year) –
that Elizabeth handed her father a poem that her mother loved.
And with unwavering voice, he quoted it at the end of his address.
It's called The Gate of the Year: God Knows.

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the [new] year:
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown".
And [the man] replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way".

1. The devil says so himself in C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*