

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

December 3, 2023 – ADVENT 1, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Waiting for God—with HOPE*”\*

Isaiah 64:1-9 (The people repent and call upon the Lord)  
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 (A plea for God to rescue His people)  
1 Corinthians 1:1-9 (Paul prays for spiritual gifts as we await Christ’s return)  
St. Mark 13:24-37 (Keep alert: The Day of the Lord is near)

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In 1953, the Irish dramatist, Samuel Beckett, premiered “Waiting for Godot,” an absurdist play, in which two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait endlessly and in vain for the arrival of someone named Godot.<sup>1</sup> The play *itself* seems endless, and the dialogue is maddeningly circular. Not until the final curtain falls does the audience realize the much-anticipated “Godot” will *never* arrive.

Fortunately, that was not the case for those ancient Israelites who awaited the coming of the Messiah. Nor is it so for those of us who expect the return of Christ. Advent, which starts today, is the beginning of the Church Year. Also, it is the season in which we both *remember*, and *look forward to*, the coming of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton, former Assistant to the Bishop of the Southeastern Synod in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, tells a story about when he was in college. He and his wife decided to go from Chapel Hill, North Carolina over to downtown Durham, to an art-house theatre to see a European movie with subtitles.

They got lost several times, couldn’t find a parking space, and finally rushed in and got a seat. By the time they settled in, the movie had already started. But it was very strange. The actors were terrible and the dialogue—what little there was—was in English, not Italian. Chilton and his wife looked at each other with puzzled faces and then, at exactly the same moment, it dawned on them they were in the wrong place, and how *very wrong* it really was. Quite embarrassed at what was on the screen, they stood up, left quickly, and went for pizza instead.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Chilton comments, “Sometimes the First Sunday of Advent can have a similarly jarring effect on folks. [We’re still remembering] the family warmth of Thanksgiving dinner and parades and football. At home we’re unpacking decorations and putting up the tree, getting cards signed and sent out, etcetera. Then we come into worship and the Lector stands up and the first words we hear during this warm and cozy season are: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil.’ We think, ‘Well, that’s an Old Testament prophet. What do you expect? Wait for the Gospel.’ But the Gospel lesson is worse: ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.’ We wonder briefly, are we in the right place? It’s a month before Christmas. What’s this all about, anyway?”<sup>3</sup>

The Church gives us Advent to remind us of why Christ came. The lessons and hymns during this season are carefully designed to help us avoid rushing through December to Christmas Day without taking the time to ponder why we needed God to intervene in our lives, and what we must do to be ready for His return.

Today’s text from Isaiah, which begins with those frightful words, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” was written in the midst of Israel’s exile in Babylon and the early days of their return to the devastated promised land. As they looked at the destruction around them, the Israelites were profoundly aware they had brought this upon themselves.

Their behavior, as individuals and as a nation, led to their destruction. And they are sorry. Now, they remember the good things God did for them in the past, they recall how God led them and provided for them.

As verse 4 says, “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.” They confess their faithlessness and idolatry, their ingratitude and lack of faith, which have led to their current predicament.

And so, as part of their repentance, they try to call to mind all the good that God did for them in the past. They are deeply sorrowful for what they have done—not sorrow as a feeling, a sentiment, or an emotion—but sorrow as an *action*, mourning as leading to a *positive new direction*, and grief as repentance.

The people of Israel expressed their sorrow in the act of turning from their own way and seeking to walk in God’s ways, just as we pray in our Confession.

And in verses 8 and 9, Isaiah asks God not only to forgive the people, but also to restore, renew, and remake them: “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.”

Like Isaiah’s prophecy, today’s Gospel lesson from St. Mark is somewhat jarring when read in public worship; it seems scary and judgmental. But upon deeper reflection, its purpose is quite the opposite—not to scare or alarm us, but to comfort and strengthen us. Jesus reminds us of what we already know: That the world around us is changing quickly—it’s not the same as it used to be; the good old days are long gone. However, we are also reminded that Christ’s Word to us never changes. Jesus, while seemingly absent for a very long time now, is actually still present with us, in the person of the Holy Spirit, in the Eucharist, and in the hearts and lives of His people. The Word made flesh is alive and working within us. Sometimes we just have to get quiet enough to listen for it.

Advent provides us with a season in which to examine ourselves honestly and with humility; to look around at our world, and to recognize why we need God, why we—and the world—need saving. It is a time for deep and serious reflection upon the way in which we live our lives, the ways in which our actions are either supportive of God’s will and ways in the world, or are hindrances to it. It is a time for repentance in the sense of reorientation, of redirecting our lives to be more in line with the way God would have us go. Thankfully, God allows U-turns. Now might be the time to make one.

Advent is a time when we wait for God to come. But this is not a hopeless, helpless waiting, alternating wishfulness with moments of despair, as in Beckett’s play. No, Advent waiting is, in the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson, a matter of “keeping awake” and watching—not for someone who will never arrive, but for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who *promised* to come back for us!

Rather than look for signs and portents in the heavens, let us look around our community and world, and pay attention to opportunities for mission and ministry, as well as focus on our hearts, as we seek to discern the work of Christ within us.

A twelfth-century cleric, Pierre de Blois, wrote: “There are three comings of our Lord: the first in the flesh; the second in the soul; the third at the judgment.... The first coming was humble and hidden; the second is mysterious and full of love; the third will be majestic and terrible.... In His first, a Lamb, at the last, a Lion; in the one in-between the two, the dearest of friends.”<sup>4</sup> In some ways, perhaps the “in-between” coming of Christ—into our hearts, souls, minds, and lives when we believe in Him—is the most important and relevant to our present existence.

Neither the historic Jesus born at Nazareth, nor the yet-to-come Christ the King and Judge of the World seem as real to us as Jesus, the lover of our souls, our comforter and advocate, the One who leads, guides, loves, and protects us until He returns. It is my prayer that as we journey through Advent, each of us will draw closer to Christ as *the dearest of friends*.

The season of Advent is a time to open our hearts to the possibility that the God of our tomorrows—our Dearest of Friends—has a new and even more fulfilling future in store for us. Rather than looking forward with fear, let us look to the future with faith and hope, spending however many days God allows us, in worshiping our Lord with full devotion and serving with love “the least of among us”—as Jesus taught us in last Sunday’s Gospel. And let us always be on the lookout for more people to love as Christ loves us, that we may share with them the reason for our great hope: That Christ keeps His word and promised to return one day, so that we could be with Him forever

Come, Lord Jesus, *come!*

**Let us pray:**

Dear Lord of all our days, most of us really hate waiting for anything. And Your people have waited for the return of the Messiah for thousands of years. It is easy to give up hope if we look around us. But let us look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, in the sure and certain assurance that because of His great love for us, He will come again and it will be an occasion of rejoicing beyond our imagining. This we ask in His holy Name. *Amen.*

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\* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “Waiting for God,” 30 November 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, 17 May 2011 (Grove Press 1<sup>st</sup> Edition).

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. Delmer Chilton, “A Time to Wait for God to Come,” *Living Lutheran*, 28 November 2014 <<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2014/11/time-wait-for-god-come/>> 25 November 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. Chilton, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> “Thought for the Week,” *Christ Church Weekly Chronicle for November 30, 2014*, via <[rector@ceccoop.net](mailto:rector@ceccoop.net)> 29 November 2014. Used with permission.