

For the 1st Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

If I were to ask my son the question – how long, he would tell me the number of months, and days without hesitation. He knows the date that he will be able to retire from the Army, and is counting down the days.

One of the chaplains that I worked for years ago, had previously been enlisted. During that time he was stationed at a weather outpost in Alaska. At that time, it was a place of isolation. There were only 6 people at the weather station, and they saw a mail and supply plane monthly – that was it. On the first day that you arrived, you put out one paper clip. Every day you added another paper clip to form a chain. This continued until you reached the half-way point of your time. Then you got to start taking off one paper clip a day. This was a way to count the days.

Anticipation – the countdown of days is a long standing tradition. You may know some phrases about being so short..Anticipation - that sounds like a good word, but it isn't something that we often like - because it involves waiting.

An.ti.ci.pa.tion.

Heinz Ketchup - - had an ad campaign a few years ago, using a Carly Simon song - you can hum it to yourselves - I won't punish you by my singing it - Anticipation, it's making me wait.

In that ad, you watched how slowly the ketchup came from the bottle.

But it would be on your burger, so there wouldn't be much anticipation. Still, I don't see that ad anymore. And I think they are selling more squeeze bottles of ketchup, so we don't have to wait in anticipation. We want what we want – now...anticipation is not something we want.

Hope and anticipation are the major themes of this day in the church year. And so we can think about those things that we anticipate:

Opening up Christmas presents on Christmas day - or can't you wait that long, so you open them up Christmas Eve? Chris will get one of her presents before she goes to spend Christmas with her kids...but I know she could wait.

The birth of a child - well don't have much choice about waiting the 9 months there - do we?

We might think about marriage, retirement, now three vaccines for covid...and a host of other significant things in our own lives, and the lives of those we care about.

An.tici.pa..tion.

"Keep awake, and watch - for you do not know when the master of the house will come."

Christ is coming again. And that may produce some confused feelings for us to be talking about this today --because what we are really thinking about anticipating is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. But by thinking of this today - we get a little of the feeling of the people alive when Jesus was born.

Waiting. 2000 years ago Jesus came. 2000 years ago he promised he would return. All of his close friends expected it in their lifetime, and so many since then have been waiting – expecting.

We have waited for such a long time, How do we react to such a long time. How do you react to that much waiting? You might even apply these ideas to the kinds of things that you wait on in your everyday life.

Some have given up on this promise. Forget it. It'll never happen - you will never get there. Drop the hope. Loose the expectancy.

Live, as if it's not going to happen. Oh, that may fit some things - like your anticipating winning the Publisher's Clearinghouse sweepstakes, but what of things that will happen?

If you live as if they won't, you will be shorting yourself. That is the norm for many people today - living without hope, or vision of the future.

But you cannot remain that way too long despair emptiness fills you too fully with that.

Without hope and expectation – depression and lack of hope can kill.

An outgrowth or a similar reaction is to become cynical. I speaking of the second coming of Jesus, some might come to the point of saying, "these are good stories of the past, that somehow were used by Jesus and the apostles to justify what they were talking about."

An.tici.pation

In the Old Testament - one of the early followers of God was given a promise - that through him and his wife there would be a great nation. He and his wife would have a son, and grandchildren...and generations descending from him for a great nation. He waited he anticipated...nothing happened.

Years passed. He and his wife saw their 50th birthdays. Abraham and Sarah turned 60 and still no child. They became cynical, and decided to make the promise happen on their own. Abraham slept with another woman, in order to have a child.

They had a child - but that was not a good thing.

An.tici.pation. God had made a promise, and at 100 years old Sarah and Abraham had a child.

God was true to the promise - even with the questioning and doubt of Abraham and Sarah.

That too can be a response to the promise of Jesus' return. We may think that somehow by our own actions, we can bring it about. That was one of the errors of the people who were part of the crusades. They thought that their action would bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth - that because of what they did, Jesus would have to return.

Anti...ci.pation

When I rededicated my life to Christ in the early 70's, many people were saying that they believed that they knew the date that Jesus would return. Well, if not the actual date, the date that he had to return by. By the 14th of May 1988.

Seems that day has come and gone. But it stirred up excitement - false excitement and false hope. Sadly, I see that this kind of thing is still going on - with people trying to read signs and predicting the date.

This false hope - kind of like a school boy crush, has all sorts of emotions that come with it. An emotional roller coaster if you will. Excitement of the moment – yes but it doesn't take too long until those emotions pass.

And when that date came and went - what happened?

For some there was great disappointment, and a loss of faith. Once all of the excitement was gone - so were they.

For some others there was a deeper commitment, as they began to see that God told us to wait that Jesus would return.

Or, there is yet another response

Give up on the promise, become cynical, have great disappointment, or having a deeper commitment aren't the only responses.

Some pretend that this promise of Jesus doesn't exist. Ignore the emotions that that includes. See faith - trust in Christ - as only something that clings to moral teachings.

Oh, I would say that at one time or another, most of us have gone through these emotions when it comes to faith. And that is where we can identify with all those who were Jews of the time before Jesus' birth.

Would it really happen?

Do we know the date?

What do we do with disappointments of when we expected it?

But there is another response - the response of faith. The response of anticipation. This doesn't ignore our emotions, but calls us to life in hope.

Hope that speaks of something beyond our experience. Hope that trust in the one who is greater.

Yes, there are times that God may seem distant. Pain and emptiness become regular companions. And yet, in that kind of despair I have seen people with hope. They have hope because they are aware of God's presence.

Hope --knowing that God is in the middle of their lives, and will bring it all together. Hoping for the day of Christ's return.

Live in the tension of hope! Live your life, knowing that Jesus will return.

Live in the tension of anticipation! Earlier and earlier it seems that the world anticipates the celebration of Christmas. Now especially, because we so long for something positive I know people who have all of their Christmas shopping done before the 4th of July. But still there comes the time of anticipation.

The time when you go to a present that is under the tree, and look at it...shake it. Is it a watch...or some jewelry? Perhaps it is just a love note - that would be good.

Anticipation. Now we know the date of Christmas - and you know the date that you will open your presents.

Jesus has a Great present for us - like the one that happened 2000 years ago - yet different. He will return.

And so now, you and I live in holding that hope and looking forward with anticipation to a date we do not know, the day of his return.

Yet you know it will happen - because he keeps his word.

Anticipation...hope for we know that our hope is certain - even if we don't know when it will happen, and so:

Watch

Be prepared

Remember the promise

And be confident in the one who made the promise.

Amen