

On Alert & Shining Bright
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Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Matthew 24:36-44

Today is the beginning of Advent. It could be called a season of waiting. How many of us like the idea of waiting for anything? It has a negative connotation. So let's rebrand it as a 'season of anticipation'. Anticipation is a positive emotion. It's closely related to Hope. And what did our first advent candle represent? Hope. It's the hope we feel because Jesus is coming. Do you remember the hope you felt as a child waiting for Christmas morning? The hope that the special item you begged for would be under the tree when the big day arrived? The anticipation was almost painful. You had the feeling that time was standing still while you waited. And mixed in with the impatience was the hope that you wouldn't do anything bad enough in the weeks before Christmas to derail your expectations. It mirrors the feelings I have toward Christ's second coming: I wait with the same mixture of hope, anxiety, and impatience. The apostle Paul said it this way in Romans 13:12-4 that "the day of Christ is almost here. So let's fling away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for, or even think about gratifying, the flesh in regard to improper desires." We long to see the world 'put right', to have justice triumph, and yet our human side cherishes a residual attachment to the material world and the pleasures it offers. Because we really don't know how to internalize the reality of the Rapture, our thoughts become vulnerable to enemy attack. Waiting becomes a spiritual battle. As a child trusts Santa to reward good behavior, so a Christian trusts God to fulfill the promises in his word, and not to disappoint. We take it on faith that when Christ establishes his new kingdom, even greater benefits and blessings of salvation will be ours. Jesus tells us in Matthew 24:31, "And God will send his angels with a loud trumpet and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." Friends, if Jesus is Lord of your life, YOU are the elect! This prophesy gives us hope. We don't need to be perfect – just willing to rely on the grace Jesus offers and hang on!

Not everyone will stand firm til the end. Impatience will win out. Many people who were raised in the church became tired of waiting for the prophecies to come to fulfillment. They say, "Nothing's changed. The

world's still corrupt and the good guy always loses." In other words, they wait poorly. Such impatience is a sign of selfishness; effectually saying 'my needs are too important and too pressing to wait for you, God'. They let their emotions lead them, rather than the word of God, so they opened the door for doubt and fell away from the faith. Paul says in Romans 8:24-25: 'For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.' Peter tells us that God always has perfect timing – neither too early nor too late. Believe that God always wants what's best for you. Because he sees a much larger picture than we do, because he knows far more than we do about the future, it makes sense to clamp down on our impatience and to deliberately trust him, walking in obedience while we wait. We might be waiting for healing. We might be waiting for a breakthrough that will help us reach a goal, or we might be waiting for our children to come back to the church. Whatever it is, we lay our prayers and our expectations before the Lord, then we wait - expectantly, manning our battle stations until the Lord comes to relieve us of that duty. We don't complain or whine about the conditions or the losses we suffer; we praise God. We wait cheerfully. We wait with hope. We wait with thanksgiving.

Signs Observed but not Recognized

If you read through the Bible you will notice that the Jewish people constantly prayed for the coming of the Messiah, the scriptures foretold it, but because they were self-absorbed, they missed the signs and were unprepared for His arrival. Can you remember a time when YOU were surprised by something you should have seen coming? Maybe it was a hospital bill that came in showing that insurance paid only 50% of the thousands of dollars charged during your stay. Or maybe it was when your 17 yr old daughter announced that the gift she was bringing home from her exchange year in France was a new baby. Although unforeseen events give us a chance to evaluate the strength of our faith, most of us don't like being caught unprepared. And speaking of babies, imagine how Herod felt when the astrologers told him that, somewhere in his territory, a new king was born, whose greatness was foretold in ages past. He was not expecting a rival to come from that direction and took immediate steps to negate the threat to his throne. The Jewish leaders were not prepared for the first coming of Christ any more than Herod was. So it's not surprising that the New Testament is full of warnings to be alert, to be prepared for the second coming of our Savior. I don't think this means we should all buy

telescopes or perpetually watch the sky. Isn't it possible that the mandate to 'be alert' is not referring to external signs, but instead calling our attention to internal threats or spiritual blindness? What if we're to be alert to the health of our souls? Are there signs in our daily lives that we are being lured off the narrow path and onto the wide path leading to destruction? Are we alert to dangerous trends in our behavior? Have we reneged on commitments for selfish reasons, or let strife and resentment into our lives without attempting to correct it? The Lord dealt with me a couple years back about strife. He revealed that I was letting my selfish desire to prove I was right lead me into strife in the home. He reminded me that love doesn't do that. He told me to let it go, to put trivial things in perspective and let God be my vindicator. Which can be difficult, because God doesn't always vindicate us immediately, which deprives us of the joy of saying, "I told you so!" But God will not use us if we lead double lives: sweet in public and contentious in private.

Jesus understood that as humans we are inherently bad at waiting when there is no specified time frame. We want to have some idea of when the waiting will be over. That's why Disney began putting the LED signs at the entrance to each attraction, telling folks how long the wait to enter was expected to be. We wait more patiently if we know what to expect. So Jesus related the Fig tree parable to give his followers a sign: A fig tree represents the nation of Israel. It is their national tree, and it was mentioned by the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos as standing for Israel. Jesus talks about recognizing signs that the tree will soon be bearing fruit. Israel, as a Jewish nation, is not yet producing a lot of fruit for Jesus. Only 2% of the Israeli population is Christian. 77% of the population is Jewish-They're still waiting for a messiah. But that will change in the end times. We know that Israel is going to be the site of the final confrontation between good and evil, the site of the battle of Armageddon. Scholars have told us that there are 1845 different biblical references to Christ's second coming. Some events mentioned as precursors to the second coming have already occurred: the 1948 reconstitution of Israel was a major sign (a miracle), After over 2000 years of non-existence, the state of Israel was brought back to life, and its scattered remnants returned.

Another sign was the 7-day war in 1967, which was responsible for bringing Jerusalem back under Jewish control, followed by our recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. When we moved the US embassy there a few years ago, that act was a step in setting the stage for Christ's

reappearance. The church is to be alert and attentive to these signs, keeping her house in order, lest Christ come back sooner rather than later. We're told in 2 Peter 3:8 that a thousand years can be like a day to the Lord, and indeed, it seems the waiting has gone on and on. This is good when it allows us to bring more people to Christ, however, we know God's patience WILL run out! I read on Olivetree.org how some theorize that America's existence is the only bulwark preventing the Tribulation. As long as America is a Christian, free nation, a beacon of light in the world, then the waiting will go on. Once she loses her fear of the Lord and is overrun with corruption, greed and unbelief, there will be no impediment to the Anti-Christ's plans for one global, Christ-hating kingdom. I fear we are dreadfully close, and yet we wait. Be alert! Satan will continue to claim souls right up until he is banished into the lake of fire. We must remain on guard against the temptation to follow the culture off the cliff.

Living with Uncertainty

Our scripture tells us, "be alert" If the head of the house had known what time the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into...The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him." This could mean the dead of night, or a time when everyone is consumed by some tumultuous world upheaval. It's probably safe to say we won't be sitting in church on our best behavior. Some Messianic Jews are convinced it will be during the festival of Pentecost, which was also a harvest festival. But if so, which year? We just have to live with the uncertainty. If God wanted us to know, He'd have told us. Unlike an order from Amazon, I can't just pay more and get overnight delivery of my revelation. As Paul said in 1 Thess. 5:6: So then, we should not be sleeping like the others. We should be awake and sober" and ready to go!

I believe that Jesus WILL return, even though I may not live to see it. Because I believe, I continue to deepen my relationship with Jesus, to focus on putting more love in my behavior, and looking for ways to bring others to Christ. I read the Bible to offset a bad day, and to learn, so I may recognize the signs preceding His coming and know what to expect. Just as the magi read the stars in Herod's day to inform them of Jesus birth, so too we can read the prophecies in the Bible to inform us how to interpret the events occurring around the world in our time. If you were living around the Gulf Coast you would be perpetually prepared with stores of bottled water, flashlights, batteries and other hurricane supplies. So too we must

be perpetually prepared for our world to end as Jesus comes to gather up His church. Plagues like Ebola or the Covid virus are just one more sign of the end times. We watch and wait with hope. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:8 “He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The tougher things get, the more grace Jesus offers us. As we approach Christmas, Advent reminds us how much God loves us.

Trust that God is always good.

When life is chaotic, we can still praise God because we know in WHOM we believe – We know that God is ALWAYS good. Our God is not a quitter. He finishes what He starts (Phil 1:6), and we can trust that there is a purpose in all he does, or doesn't do. As imperfect as we are, He LOVES us!

Isaiah 30:18-21 says, Blessed are all who wait for Him.....When you turn to the right or left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “this is the way; walk in it”.

We have the Holy Spirit living in us to act as our guide, day in and day out. If we listen to him we will not stray off the path God chose for us. Let's start every day with thanksgiving, with praise for our beloved savior and our mighty God. Rainy, cold, hot, or snowy, thank God each day that you are alive to see it, that you are saved by the blood of Jesus, and that you can look forward to eternal life in His presence. That's what gives us hope when the kids are screaming, the boss is angry and life is not a bowl of cherries. When we are tempted to lock the kids in the closet, or throw out the phone and stay in bed, we find something to be thankful for so we can tap into the hope Christ offers that tomorrow will be better...and if it isn't, then the next day will be. We lean on each other. Together we are strong. We've got this! We are eager to celebrate our savior's birth, and we look forward to seeing Jesus reappear on Earth.

Hear the advice in Titus 2:11-13 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great god and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Advent is 'hope provided'. As a church we point each other to God and call out how blessed we are. Too many people are still desperate to find their purpose, to find a way to transform their unfulfilling existence. How do they deal with illness or injustice? How sad to live without the hope of miracles in your life! Christians can start every day expecting something good to happen because we live in hope.

Conclusion

Advent is all about hope. It's expectant.

As David says in Psalm 140: I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope. Christmas gives us the perfect occasion to be a blessing to others and to share the good news of salvation through Jesus.

Start every day with praise. Nourish the Holy Spirit in your heart with continual praise for what God has done for you. Put the Bible app on your phone so you can read a devotional at lunch or at coffee break. Worship revives the soul. Count your blessings daily: from being able to speak, and hear, to having hair on your head (or chest, or toes). Grow in gratitude.

Practice grace.. You are the only Jesus some people will ever see. Nourish the light within you! Give yourself and others some grace. When someone hurts you or disappoints you, don't lash out in anger or sit in self-pity, but go do something nice for someone else and you'll find it makes you feel better. If you stumble, repent and move on. We can live full of joy and anticipation because the thought of meeting Jesus face to face lights us up like a Christmas tree.

Glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Forever and Ever. Amen.