

"GOD ONLY KNOWS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Advent begins today - the time of preparation for Christmas. In these coming four weeks you're going to hear the sounds of Christmas - the Christmas carols that we're so familiar with and love so very much. You'll be hearing them on the radio, you'll be hearing them across the street in front of Gimbels and best of all, you'll be hearing them here in our Church. The sounds of Christmas. Christmas would not be Christmas without the music of Christmas.

But there is another sound in Advent - the sound of different music. And you will not hear this music in the stores or on the radio, but you will hear it at Church. It's the music of Advent. It's not sung often or gladly, even in Church. We'd much prefer to sing the Christmas carols. Why do we have to sing those gloomy Advent hymns some of which are in a minor key.

On this First Sunday in Advent I will tell you that we will sing the Christmas carols in this Church, increasingly so as we move toward Christmas. But first, the Church says, we must hear the other song - the song of Advent.

DEVELOPMENT

You can see it as two melodies in a duet, the one voice focusing on the Manger in Bethlehem, the Shepherds and the Wise Men, the mother and her baby - the most human of all scenes, which speaks to even non-Christians because it is so universally human. That's the song of Christmas. The other voice, the other melody, tells what happened before the Child was born, and what will happen because this Child was born. That's the Advent voice, and it sweeps back through the pages of history, back to the Israelites in bondage longing for a Messiah. Hear it again in the carol we sang a few moments ago:

"O come, O come Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear."

Advent goes back to the Old Testament - to Isaiah, and Malachi, and Ezekiel, back to a nation waiting and longing for God to come and deliver them. And it goes back even farther than that, back even to Genesis, and says that what happened at Bethlehem is mysteriously related to what happened at the Creation.

And then it looks forward, beyond what we can see. It says that what happened at Bethlehem is also mysteriously related to what will happen in the End. Advent puts the little town of Bethlehem against the backdrop of the cosmos and all of history, and says that we can understand what happened at Bethlehem only by seeing it in that perspective. And that most beautiful and haunting of all Advent hymns does this. The choir will sing it before we commune.

"Of the Father's love begotten,
Ere the world began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the Source, the Ending He".

That's the song of Advent and it reminds us that what happened at the beginning and what will happen at the end are mysteriously related to what happened at Christmas. It says that you are not merely looking upon a tender,

some release from their bondage. They wait without understanding, without knowing why they must endure this exile. But they wait faithfully, trusting that one day God will act and give them new life. Until that time, they wait. Members of this fellowship today, around this city, in hospitals, not able to

be with us today because of pain or sorrow, waiting - without answers. That's what spiritual maturity looks like. It doesn't have all the answers.

That's why Paul said, "Prophecy passes away, tongues will cease, knowledge will pass away" - the three claims to certainty. Paul says that they are all illusions. They don't work. The only things that endure, and help us endure are faith, hope and love. When in a time of waiting, those are your provisions - faith, hope and love. No one knows but the Father.

THE FATHER / THE FUTURE

Let's look at that word, "Father". It's strange that it is there in such a chapter as this 13th chapter with all the violence about the end and the judgment. It's there. It's no accident that it appears in this passage about the future. I think Jesus had a definite purpose in mind when He chose it. The word "Abba" - the most personal form of address of the male parent in Aramic, "Abba". It's like "daddy". I think it's there because He wants to tell us that in times of waiting, remember....we're to be like children.

"Lest you become as little children you shall not enter the Kingdom of God". No one knows but the Father. The Father. And that's sufficient. It ought to be.

What we are asked to have faith in and place our hope in is God - whom Jesus said is like a father. We're asked to go beyond the perimeters of our present into an unknown future, trusting that Father, who brought us thus far, will take us home. Though we may not see Him, He knows us.

That's how we are to view the future. And that is why, I believe, even though Jesus repeated the prophecies of his day, even the most violent of them, He repudiated them. I think that's what He's doing here. I think that's what it means to say - no one knows but the Father. It was the most consistent thing He said about God - that He was like a Father. He addressed God that way Himself. He told us to do the same thing. We do it now so commonly that we forget that before He instructed the disciples in what we call, "The Lord's Prayer" no one ever dared call God Father. You were to use the language of majesty addressing God, not the language of family. But He taught us differently. He said, "say Abba" - say Father.

Kings act arbitrarily; fathers act lovingly. Kings are to be feared; fathers are to be trusted. They keep their promises. And even if you did not have fathers who were trustworthy and kept their promises, even if you didn't have fathers at all, you still know what it means. I think those who did not, know more than those who did what it means. That's why Jesus said God is like a Father, because there is that need in each one of us that needs to know that the One who created us is trustworthy.

SECONDLY: WATCHING

And then to the final word. Watch. That means prepare for the unexpected. As Christians we believe He will return. He is Alpha and Omega. He is the beginning and the end. We do not know when, nor do we know how. It is not impossible that His Second Coming will be as much a surprise as His first. It is very possible that all the prophecies about Him will be confounded.

I came across this very fascinating information about chess. It's in a book by a man named David Spaner, who is a chess expert. He said that there are four hundred different possible positions in chess after each player has made one move. And after they have made two moves there are 70,000 possible positions on the board. And after three moves by both sides the possible configurations on the board after that exceed 9 million. It's astounding. The number of distinct, non-repeating forty-move chess games, he said, the number of possible games that you can play without ever repeating the sequences of moves, is greater than the number of electrons in the universe.

I don't particularly warm up to chess player analogies about God, but I tell you this, if He limits Himself in accomplishing His will by what we do, then He's not nearly finished with this world. That means that what looks like some disaster for us, some event that leads us to think, surely He's going to sweep His mighty arm across the board in anger - that disaster is but one move for which He has an infinite number of counter moves. So watch.

I think that this has this meaning. Watch this! Or, you haven't seen anything yet; Or, wait 'til you see what I'm going to do next. To watch means to be prepared for wonderful surprises.

AND TO WATCH MEANS THIS

It means to pray and to work. Pray for peace. Work for it. Pray that hunger will end in this world and give to it. Pray that violence to children and to women will end, and do something about it. Pray that all those who are oppressed in any way will be free. Pray that the love of Christ will spread across the world. Pray "Thy Kingdom come", and do something about it. That's what it means to watch. Because who knows. Maybe the moves that you make, maybe the thing you do, will open possibilities that He can use that never existed before you moved. So watch. Work and pray. Because you haven't seen anything yet.

I think it's probably been our arrogance and even our anti-semitism that has not allowed us to see that the Church is in very much the same place today as our Jewish friends are. The Jews wait for a Messiah; we wait for the Messiah's return. There's a theological difference, but there's not much practical difference; in fact, the instructions to the Christians to watch is no different than what the Jews were doing in the First Century and what they have been doing ever since. They have been watching. In fact, at their celebrations they put an empty place at their table for the Messiah. They are waiting, just as we are.

But over the Centuries there has emerged a skepticism on the part of many Jews about the Messiah. So many rabbis claiming to be the Messiah. Jewish scholars say that there have been 16 or 17 of them since Jesus. And that it not unlike Christians prophesying the Second Coming. There have been at least sixteen or seventeen false starts since Jesus.

So in terms of the future we are all alike. We are in a time of waiting. And that's why I think a lesson given by Johanan ben Zakkai, the last pupil of the famous Hillel, is for us. It's perfect for Advent, the season of waiting and of watching. He said this:

"If you are planting a tree and you hear that the Messiah has come, finish planting the tree. Then go and inquire."

Jesus said, you're going to hear all kinds of prophecies. But remember, no one knows the hour or the day. No one knows but the Father. So watch. Watch. That is, pray for the Kingdom. Work for it. And when you finish the work, and if you've got nothing better to do, then go and inquire. But first, do the work that the Lord has given you to do.

PRAYER Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who didst lead both wise men and shepherds, both the sophisticated and the plain, to a manger in Bethlehem to worship the Christ Child, lead us into His presence this Advent.

Prepare our hearts with proper repentance in these coming days.

And then reveal once more at Christmas the mystery of Your grace, Your love for us that sent not a refiner's fire to condemn, but a helpless Babe to live our life and to show us that You Love us.

Grant us faith to believe...that if You didst lay in a manger the gift above all other gifts, You are able to be with us wherever we are and whatever our need. If our lives are darkened, You are the light for us. If we are confused, You can show us a better way. If we are deeply anxious and troubled, You can give us the gift of inner peace. If we are afraid, You can grant us courage. If we are tired of our lives, and want to have new lives, You can renew us.

For we ask all of this in the name and spirit of the Christ Child.