

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of the present, God of the past, God of the future, you know all that is, was, and is to come. Our past sins, our present uncertainties, and our future acts are all apparent to you clearly. Although we try to control the future, to make it what we want, we seek to open ourselves to all the goodness and darkness in store for us. Although we want to be in charge, help us realize that we cannot. We exist in between realities that we can control and those we cannot; guide us to distinguish faithfully between the two and respect those we cannot change.

As we celebrate what it means to live throughout the church calendar each year, help us to recognize each season for what it calls us to celebrate. We recognize Advent today, when we are called to anticipate the coming of Christ which was long ago and the coming of Christ that will be. Guide us to faithfully anticipate, recognize tension, and engage in hope, Holy God. Help us not to keep our heads in the sky, unable to see what is around us. Help us not to forcibly control what is to come. Instead, allow us to focus on the now and shape ourselves and our world with your ever-empowering hope in the future. We pray all these things on the one we anticipate, in Advent and always, to confirm our hope, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

After receiving a lot of questions about what exactly the liturgical calendar of the church year is, I decided its time for a sermon series. Now's a great time, since we are in a time of relative stability. Each season has a focus of how we orient our minds and hearts in worship, in self-reflection, and growth. They can be dark, they can be joyful, they can be contemplative, but we must celebrate them all in light of their nature to really dig deep into

figuring out what faithfulness is across all the joys and struggles of human nature. We see visible signs of these seasons in the church. From time to time throughout the year, you see color changes on the paraments throughout the sanctuary, for each church season corresponds with a color meaningful to its celebration. Right now, with red, we celebrate the holiday and season of Pentecost, which will be followed by Kingdomtide, or Ordinary Time, which is celebrated with green. However, I decided that for ease, we'll start at the beginning of the Christian year, even if it doesn't seem to fit with our current season. The beginning of the Christian calendar is not like our regular calendar; our Christian year begins usually around the end of November. Count back four Sundays from December 25th, and you have the beginning of the new Christian year. How should we celebrate our Christian New Year? We start with the beginning of the Gospels: anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ. That season is Advent, with a color of blue or purple for its paraments. I believe there are three words we need to unpack with the season of Advent, so that we may fully grasp what the season has to offer. Those words are anticipation, tension, and hope.

We can easily consider ourselves people of anticipation; in a way, it's hard for us to sit in our own skin. From the beginning of our lives, our culture has taught us not to be patient with waiting. We are told to have it right now! If we can't have it right now, we are implicitly taught to keep our minds on it until it happens. We are taught not to live through dark times but push ourselves to happier times. That is why we as a culture struggle with the natural human process of grief. All in all, we are not taught to live into the moment. I'm not gonna ask for a show of hands, but how many of you have let your minds wander during a sermon? How many of you have sat during worship and let your minds go to what you need to take care of after worship? How many of you have just wrote down shopping

lists without realizing it? We focus our thoughts of anticipation on doing things on the future, and by virtue of such thinking, we miss out on the present.

It's hard for us to be sitting in one place with our minds totally on one thing. We are almost always never where we are because we have something else to play with. It can be a tablet computer, your cell phone, or some other object. We are a culture of distraction; we are never taught to sit in silence, to reflect, to keep still, and I think it truly shows.

(silence for several seconds) How did that feel? It felt awkward and uncomfortable, didn't it? I'm guessing that's because most of our thoughts were on what's going to happen next instead of what is currently happening. During the season of Advent especially, but indeed throughout the whole year, we need to practice being in the present.

I believe real anticipation is never about being somewhere else but being fully in the present as we ground ourselves for the event to come. The word "Advent" derives from the Latin word "adventus," which means "coming." Coming means, well, "not here yet." And we shouldn't make it here prematurely. Anticipation is rooted in being fully here while knowing there is something on the horizon; it's not trying to live in the future at the expense of now. When we focus on the here and now, letting our attentions be absorbed on what is happening only in front of us, we cannot be elsewhere. Let's try that exercise again. Instead of considering when my next word will come, concentrate either on a prayerful word or your breathing. Try to be here and nowhere else, because the future will come in its own time. (silence of several seconds) How was that different? It may seem just a bit easier to be in the present when we keep ourselves mindful of the present. It's a practice but a worthwhile one. I believe when we focus on the present, we are less likely to get past the future destination, feeling satisfied that we have lived it to the fullest.

Advent also calls us into tension. We don't think about Christianity holding tension for us. On the other hand, sometimes Christianity is much more about living the questions than the answers. Think about this piece of wisdom for a second: the Christian life is never complete. We exist between the calling and the fulfillment. Bruce Epperly reminds us in his article "A Sober Advent" that we in this season live in faithful unbelief. What God has promised has not fully come to pass, and so we anticipate when that is the case. We recognize the calling of God that with God there is peace. However, we look on the news and see military action, war, unrest. There is space between the promise and the fulfillment. We believe in a God of plenty, where all will have their needs taken care of. However, there is still poverty, children starve every day, and others have more than they need. We cannot celebrate holding that reality, for we recognize that God has not yet come and fully delivered on God's promises. When will God complete God's promises? We don't know! Because we don't know, we live in tension, especially in this season of waiting. This is the time in-between promise and completion, calling and fulfillment, and we must be in-between with it. It is not without hope, but it is without resolution in this time. It's difficult to stand without resolution. It's not necessarily faithful to sing of Christ's coming when, in this season, we are to recognize that Christ has not yet come. We can't talk of the coming of the Kingdom of God when, in this season, the Kingdom has not come yet! And so, we wait with anticipation and recognize things aren't as we hope and that God has promised, but God will bring these things to completion in God's own time.

The final component to the season is hope. Like anticipation, culture has diminished hope into a rather cheap word. It seems to be best used as an off-hand likelihood that you desire. I hope I will get pizza for lunch. I hope the Cubs win today. Hope here is not

focused on any eternal significance or consequence. Hope in the focus of Advent is worth much more. Hope has eternal significance and eternal driving force. Because we are God's people, hope is not a passive word but an active word. True hope is an energy that drives you to seek something or work for something, especially when the odds are against you. True hope doesn't flinch, it doesn't give up, it doesn't stop when it is told to. True hope becomes a part of your very being. The hope that we foster is rooted in God's eternal purposes of life-giving for all people. In the midst of darkness and the tension we spoke of earlier, we live in hope. Hope accepts the calling and moves toward the destination. In other words, we do not sit back and wait; we work for the change. Peace does not exist yet, but we work for the day when it will be a part of everyone's lives. Poverty still exists in the world, but we work for the day when it becomes just a bad memory. In the season of Advent, hope acts as the counterbalance to the possibly unnerving idea of tension. We are to fully live into the tension, but we recognize it does not have the final authority. Without the tension, hope has no greater meaning.

All too often we want to make the cultural Christmas season the same as Advent, but that really dishonors the mentality of Advent. How do we be people of a faithful Advent? We root ourselves in anticipation, live into the tension, and foster active hopefulness. It begins with making the now your focus, not what is to come. We see the world around us is not what we want it to be, not what we hope for it to be, not what it was promised would one day be. And so, we wait and prepare during Advent to spiritually cleanse ourselves and work for the world that will welcome the coming of Jesus Christ. The focus is not that Jesus is coming, so we need to put our personal houses into order. The focus is that Jesus is coming; we want to receive him the best we can. We want to refine our minds and our

hearts for the coming of light once again into the world, and we do that when we anticipate, live into tension, and hope for the future.

Overall, Advent is hard. Advent is anticipation. Anticipation is not about keeping our minds on the future, but living in the now, preparing our minds and hearts for what is to come. Advent is tension. Advent is the darkness before the full celebration of Christmas and should be fully grasped as that. Advent is hope. Advent is recognizing there are promises that have not yet come to pass, but we hope for their completion. Advent is not just about watching the clock and waiting for Christmas. It's not the necessary period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's not the cultural Christmas that cares about Christmas Carols and credit cards. It's about faithful waiting, watching and living. God's purposes are not yet complete, and it is a time of darkness. Darkness in the Christian life is never a final destination but a place to invest more in what hope means. Even when the Christ child arrives, we are not yet complete in our hope; our hope has just taken a new form. Although we are not at the season of Advent, let us take its lessons for contemplation now and living when we reach the beginning of a new Christian Year. Amen and Amen.