

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The First Sunday of Advent: November 27, 2022

“How much time?”

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this first Sunday of Advent. So here is the warning, "this is Advent not Christmas". This is the season of patient waiting, which leads us to our scripture.

This scripture can be read in so many ways. We can have the apocalyptic feeling of preparing to live through a terrible time; we can imagine the "left behind" series where people float up to heaven in the air while those left behind are judged. But instead, when I read this scripture, it just screams to me of reality -- not something so far away or dramatic.

Almost every time I walk into the home of someone who is terminally ill, I get the question, you know the one. In fact, maybe you have asked this to yourself, “how much time do I have?” Well, we have a pretty good handle on this scientifically and medically speaking. Don't get me wrong - we have those surprises, and never mind accidents and just stupidity, but the true answer is, only God knows.

To be honest, I am pretty sure the Jewish people who wrote this Gospel thought their end was near; thought that some dramatic event would happen that would justify all their suffering for the sake of justice, compassion, and following Jesus. But instead, they had to wait. As we know today, their Realm and Jesus did not appear again in their lifetime.

I would like to emphasize here that I believe we all get to experience the second coming of our Lord when we die. Who better to meet us? He will be in his glory, and so will we. And yes, I believe eventually there will be a better world, a Kingdom of God. But right now, we are still in the very early pangs of labor for that better world. So why this kind of cryptic message?

Here, as is always the case, God reveals enough about the future to give us hope, but not so much that we do not have to live and walk by faith day after day. We have assurance about the things hoped for, and conviction about the things not yet seen, but what we do not have is a timetable in the Scriptures, nor would that be very helpful to the faithful anyway.

Let's get back to the reality of our original question, "how much time do I have?"

Back in 1978, I was in Tennessee working horses for a show farm when the police came to my door. Remember those days before cell phones and texting? There was no phone in the barn. The police came to tell me that my father had died, and my mother was sending a plane ticket to get me home to New Jersey.

When I got to New Jersey my mother was a wreck and my neighbor explained that it had been just an ordinary day, like no other. My parents had their breakfast and my mother was going to go out food shopping. Now you have to understand that it was my mother who had always been the sickly one, with numerous surgeries and chronic illness, so this was totally unexpected.

My father, off of work on this Saturday like normal, sat in his chair and put the TV on. He waved goodbye to my mother who then went shopping. We all know where this is going, don't we? The normal day, just like every other Saturday my parents had had. Well, of course my mother came home and began to carry the groceries into the kitchen, surprised that my father had not gotten up to help her like he always did. To hear the story, my mother began to complain to my father. She then checked on him only to find that he was gone. Just like that, on just an ordinary day.

Do I share this story to scare you? Not at all. I share this story, a pretty simple and common one, to explain that there seems to be truly a purpose for everything under heaven. There are just simply some things we are not meant to know, and there is reason for this. What we are called to do during Advent is to sit, and learn to sit comfortably, in the place of the great unknowing. To have faith that we are in the right place at the right time even if it feels wrong.

In this world of instant gratification and the ability to notify someone around the globe of an event in a nano second, there seems to be no incentive to just be patient and wait. To be still and know I am God. To be pregnant with hope and expectation while moving about your everyday life. And this leads to question: why would a loving God do such a thing?

The person who knows for sure he will die in two days may well do all sorts of things out of character because he has a firm deadline before him and throws caution to the wind. That person may jeopardize someone else in various ways, including their spiritual journey. For those who would repent, maybe this one time only, what does that say about the lifetime of that person?

Having expectation, accepting the great unknowing, gathers energy, gathers hope, sustains faith, and also makes you accountable. I believe we can all agree that we don't want to be the one who did or said something terrible on someone's last day on earth. So, then why would you do that at any time? I believe that is the lesson. One never knows when Christ will return, in whatever way that is. And according to this scripture, not even Jesus knows. What will you be doing at that moment?

Also, for the opposite effect, even a Christian person who swears they know Christ will certainly not return in their lifetime may well be tempted to throw caution and their morals to the wind. I am sure many of you have seen this in a film where the character is immortal and has nothing to lose. Again, God's timing is perfect and protective in some way we are unable to comprehend.

There are a lot of unexpected things that happen in our lives. We make it through them; we have made it so far. The world has always held its challenges, but we must remember we are beloved of God, and as I have said before, "God's got this", especially if we let Him. Let us kindle our patience this Advent, and live everyday as if it were our last, yet pregnant with expectation.

Christ has died,
Christ has risen,
Christ will come again!

But only God knows ,where or when. Amen