

Year B, December 30, 2017
1 Advent
Christ Church, Mexia

May we be ever aware of you, O Lord, despite the secular distractions of this season. Amen.

On this first Sunday of Advent we are aware of global estrangement, brokenness and despair – and conscious of the emptiness and poverty in our own lives. But “(A)dvent is not so much a penitential season focused on our unfaithfulness,” according to John Westerhoff, “as it is a season of paradoxes: longing anticipation and patient waiting; ... waiting for what never seems to come, but continuing in hopeful trust; desiring to give up control, yet opening ourselves to few possibilities for life. Perhaps if we took seriously these stories of Advent, life in the church would be somewhat different from what most of us know it to be.”

For many of us, Advent becomes a preparation for a secular Christmas through frantic, exhausting, escapist behavior. We eat too much, party too much, stay up too late. We frantically clean and decorate our homes. We buy presents. Most of us experience some “Christmas joy” but it is very short-lived and lacking in depth. In fact, this is a season when the lonely experience even greater loneliness, the weary become more tired, and almost everyone ends up with lower bank accounts. And when Christmas finally comes, we fall apart.

We are reminded by the gospel scripture this morning to “Keep awake.” Just a few weeks ago we heard this same message in the parable of the ten maidens and their lamps, waiting for the bridegroom. On that occasion I endeavored to speak on mindfulness and being present in the moment. But because the overall theme for this Sunday has traditionally been “Hope,” I am going to go in a slightly different direction this morning.

C.S. Lewis, in his *Mere Christianity*, defined hope as: “A continual looking forward to the eternal world.” “G.F. Watt has a famous painting entitled *Hope*. It pictures a poor woman against the world. Her eyes are bandaged so that she cannot see ahead. In her hands is a harp, but all the strings are broken save one. Those broken strings represent her shattered expectations, her bitter disappointments. That one last unbroken string is the string of hope. She strikes that string and a glorious melody floats out over the world; it fills her dark

skies with stars. The artist painted a great truth: even when all else is gone, you still can have hope." (Hodgin, p 450) And so, today I see "keep awake" as "have hope." Have hope that the kingdom of God is coming, the kingdom of God is near!

That may be difficult to believe when looking at the world today – but have hope, place your hope in God. As Thomas a Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*, "In Thee, therefore, O Lord God, I put all my hope... For many friends shall not profit, nor strong helpers be able to succor, nor prudent counselors to give a useful answer, nor the books of the learned to console, nor any precious substance to deliver, nor any secret and beautiful place to give shelter, if Thou Thyself do not assist, help, strengthen, comfort, instruct, keep in safety... To hope in Thee above all things is the strongest solace of Thy servants."

So, we hope in God that things will change, that life will get better. And we should remember: "The first person to invent the wheel only discovered what God had already designed, for the Lord created things in circles. The stars and the planets are round, they move in orbital circuits, and life, as a result, moves in cycles. Every 100 years, we have a new century; every 365 days, we have a new year; every 24 hours, we have a new day; every 60 minutes, we have a new hour. God created the potential for new beginnings into the design of our universe.

And for good reason. Every hero of Scripture needed new beginnings: Adam and Eve after they ate the forbidden fruit; Moses after he killed the Egyptian; David after his adulterous relationship; Elijah after an emotional breakdown in the desert; the disciples after Good Friday... And maybe you."

Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* which is the translation of the Greek word *parousia*, commonly used to reference the second coming. So, unlike my early childhood experience in another tradition of celebrating the birth of Christ, today we are really reminded of the original waiting or watchfulness of the ancient Hebrews for their Messiah, as well as our own Christian longing for the second coming of Christ. At times, I know, we get discouraged, we think it's not going to happen – but keep awake, have hope! As humans we often want things to be comfortable, finished. But as Ralph Waldo Emerson reminded us: "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.