

# SERMON: 3 Advent, Year A

Matthew 11:2-11, Isaiah 35:1-10 & James 5:7-10  
Preached Sunday, Dec. 16, 2007 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Lately, these days in mid-Advent feel like a time of, Do-I-have-to's?

In just the past few days, I've asked myself:

"Do I have to do all this Christmas shopping?"

"Do I have to edit all those bulletins for Christmas services?"

"Do I have to finish getting up the last load of leaves that are still lying in my front yard?"

"Do I have to get myself and my family down to the church to have our photo taken for the new directory?"

"Do I have to take time to say my prayers this morning? ...get enough exercise; ...drink the prescribed amount of water; ...and not eat too much food that's bad for me?"

"Do I have to do something to help the least of these?"

"Do I have to go to that extra social event that sounded like a good idea before I got so blasted busy?"

AND (since the weather forecast looked a little different a few days ago):

"Do I have to write a sermon for this Sunday?"

You know how this goes. On any given day, the answer to some of these questions is, "Of course you have to do that, you knucklehead!" To others, the answer is, "Yes, but maybe you can wait a few days," or, perhaps, "I'll just let that one go and see if the world really will fall apart."

For me — and perhaps for many of you — we are asking ourselves such questions a lot these days. And, no matter what else we might tell ourselves, our answers will shape how we observe this season of anticipation.

I have a friend who is having a mighty struggle with these kinds of questions, right now. He has a lot on his plate. His job isn't going the way he hoped it would be this many years into his career, and he's wondering if it's time for a change. His wife has had a big setback of her own, and their grown son is in transition with his first job just out of college.

When I was with my friend recently, he was reflecting ruefully on a verse from Psalm 46: "Be still, and know that I am God."

"I'd love to be still and know that God is God," he said, exasperated by the circumstances of his life. "But every time I sit down to say my prayers and try to be still, my mind is preoccupied. It races from one thing to the next — which is not a very prayerful feeling. So I get up to do something about whatever I can't get out of my head — but then I'm not still anymore."

"It seems," said my friend, "that I just can't find any peace."

For me, this is the backdrop to the words we hear today from Jesus and John and James and Isaiah. And their message seems perfectly pitched for those of us who are asking these questions.

“Be patient, beloved.... Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near” (James 5:7 & 9). “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, [who] will come and save you’ ” (Isaiah 35:4).

Even in the midst of our anxiety and restlessness and impatience, God is not only near, God is here — among us, in our midst, and even within us. God is near and here when we do not know what the future holds. God is near and here when things in our life are not as we expected or hoped they would be. God is near and here, perhaps especially so, when we cannot be still and when we feel as if we are very far from God.

The paradox of faith is that when we cannot bear the uncertainty and restlessness of life, when it feels impossible to be patient, when life itself seems unbearable, that is the moment when God seems to show up. For my friend, it happened when others were there to listen to his lament, when we said simply, “Oh yes, we’ve been there. What you’re going through right now is awful, and it feels like hell. But you can get through it, with God’s help.” It wasn’t a very spectacular moment. As far as I could tell, there were no warm fuzzy feelings in the air. But my friend was able to say that his burdens did not seem so heavy as they had before.

For me, this is the central dilemma of Advent and Christmas. Somewhere along the way, I’ve been conditioned to look for something spectacular that will take my breath away and give me warm fuzzy feelings. John’s disciples and the crowd seem to have had similar expectations. But what they get is John and Jesus, who aren’t showing them what they wanted to see.

“What did you go out to look at?” Jesus asks. A reed shaken by the wind? Someone dressed in soft robes? Or a prophet? Neither John nor Jesus live in palaces or dress in soft robes. A reed will bend in whichever direction the wind blows, but not a prophet. A prophet follows the direction of the Spirit, and speaks the truth of God despite the contrary pressures of power and privilege.

“Go and tell ... what you hear and see,” Jesus says. “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (vv. 4-5).

In these words, I hear Jesus saying there are plenty of things I think I need to do — that aren’t that important. But a few are: taking time for prayer, cultivating patience, staying close to the least of these, and waiting until we can see the kingdom coming. That’s how we remind ourselves that the Messiah not only has come but is coming again and again.

It’s hard to adjust our long-standing expectations. But the difference between the things I think I have to do or see and the gift God wants me to have are separated sometimes by just a few degrees.

Around this time of year, our family always goes out for a special holiday meal. Afterwards, we drive around to enjoy the Christmas lights and decorations that are on display. Two nights ago, Will and I were running errands and, on our way home, we tried to find some of the more impressive and spectacular displays. We didn’t have much luck. In fact, the one place we always used to go that had a mammoth display of lights and decorations scaled them back last year to a fraction of their former glory.

But God had a more impressive set of lights in mind for us. When we were driving through one neighborhood, Will looked out the car window and saw several falling stars streak across the night sky, one after the other. "Look, Dad," he said, "there goes another one!" It turns out that the Geminid meteor shower was at its peak that night. When we got home, I saw one of the largest shooting stars I've ever seen.

Do all of our wildest expectations have to be fulfilled this season? No, my friends, they don't. But I think God wants us to anticipate the unexpected: the blind who see again, the poor who receive good news, and the restless souls who find just enough stillness to know that God is still God.