

Sunday December 3rd, 2023

Advent I

Mark 13:24-37

“This Place is a Mess

How do you feel about house cleaning. Be honest. I have met people who enjoy it but I don't get their enthusiasm. I have learned some secrets about house cleaning from some of you. For example: if you need some vacuuming Kent Rapley is a wiz with the central vacuum system. I found online some tweets about house cleaning that I think we can appreciate.

Someone tweeted, “My house was clean. Then the kids woke up.” Another wrote: “I have discovered the secret to a clean house: never let your children or husband enter it.” I am sure you have pondered this thought, “Why can't the house clean itself? It seems to get dirty by itself!” “Cleaning your house while your kids are still growing is like shoveling the walk before it stops snowing.”

I agree with the person who said, “I'm not into spring cleaning. Come to think of it, I'm not into summer, fall or winter cleaning either.” Cleaning with kids in the house is like brushing your teeth while eating Oreos. Behind every good marriage is a great house cleaning service. Either I need a babysitter to watch my kids while I clean my house, or I need a maid to clean my house while I watch my kids.

I am talking about cleaning our houses today because it is the Advent season. Yikes, it's Advent. That's the proper liturgical formulation for this season: “Yikes, it's Advent!” Advent is a call to get our house in order.

Our frustration exhibited in our exclamation :Yikes its Advent, it is an admission that no matter how closely we pay attention to the calendar, no matter how much we follow the development of the Christian year, we are still surprised when Advent comes. It seems too early. Too early is our normal greeting for this time of year. “It's too early,” we exclaim to all we meet. “It can't be time for this,” we opine. And who knows what *opine* means, but it seems to fit this season. And not because of the greenery!

We are just not ready; we have too much to do; our lists grow longer; our accomplishments are fewer. For everything we check off, six more slip onto the list. How does that happen? This is where the whole legend about elves came into being – people found their Christmas to-do lists growing almost before their eyes. Who is doing this? Must be elves. We're not ready. That is precisely why we need Advent. The creators of the Christian calendar knew that we all would need a swift kick to get the new year started.

So, it begins with a call to get ready. Because we aren't ready. Worse than that, we've forgotten that there is anything to get ready for. Or we thought that what we are supposed to be getting ready for is a celebration of the past. We are preparing for a historical observation of something God did at one time. And we are still grateful for it; we are still defined by it; we still try to live differently because of it. But it is to an extent, old news. It is a case of “been there, done that” when it comes right down to it. Or is it?

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What is it that we are waiting for? What are we looking for? The first reading for this first Sunday of Advent reminds us that what we long for is not a historical remembrance but a new reality, a new encounter. And this new encounter can be shocking; it can wake us up from overlooking what really surrounds us. Advent reminds me a bit of a common childhood experience.

You no doubt remember being sent to clean your room. And you also remember your first thought as you stumbled through the door and flopped onto the bed: “Looks clean to me!” Right? Never mind the pile of dirty clothes on the floor. Or the stack of papers teetering on the edge of the desk you can barely see the top of. Yeah, maybe that’s a banana peel on the floor or an apple core, or a bag of chips you finished a few days ago. “But it looks clean to me,” you think. Or maybe clean enough. But we know it isn’t.

Or maybe it’s like eating supper with your family and looking forward to the pie or cake waiting to be indulged but you must get past whatever yucky vegetable is still on your plate. What excitement this season brings! Certainly, you’ve done it many times before; the rituals may be set in stone, the expectations ripe, and the patterns already unrolling. But there is something about the season of Advent that brings forth the kid in us, and we all lean into the hope. So, let the excitement grow; let the buzz be felt. But is our place ready, our hearts ready?

As adults, we know that there is work to be done before the season can really get underway. As excited as we may get Advent does not just happen. We must prepare.

This year to help us prepare we are emphasizing community in this Advent worship series – entitled, “Company Is Coming!” Our goal is to emphasize hospitality and inclusion. Our questions are: “How will we welcome the Christ who comes? But also, how will we welcome our neighbors and family we don’t know yet into our midst?” So, what is the situation for us as we prepare. We all know that even for those whose religious impulse might be minimal, there is something about this time of year that brings people out.

This is our chance to make connections, to go all out welcoming neighbors and strangers alike. So, throughout this season, we’ll be asking the worship team to pay attention not just to what happens in the sanctuary, but we need also to be conscious about what happens at the front doors and the fellowship areas. Here is an opportunity for us to remember that worship is not just an hour set aside, but it is a way of life for the community of faith.

So, if we are a welcoming company, where do we start? By taking an honest look at our own space! What have we become used to, but would look like a community that doesn’t care about its space to a new person? Febreze has a commercial series that asks people, “Have you become nose blind”. Have you become so used to the smells around you that it no longer comes across as unpleasant to you. This year as we haul out the seasonal decorations, don’t let them cover up or hide the mess. Get rid of the mess before we make the space ready to receive our guests.

This isn’t necessarily a call to a makeover of the sanctuary! But it is a call to ask questions about space. It could also be a time for adding some interpretation to the traditional symbols that fill the worship space. Do a little research and ask why we have greenery and trees.

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What do the lights and wreath represent? Use PowerPoint; or let signs do some of the explaining. Let people know that the decorations aren't used just because they are beautiful (although they certainly are), but because they have meaning; the decorations proclaim the faith as assuredly as the sermon or the hymns. So, let them speak.

Look at the worship order before this season begins. What is in there that might need some explanation for someone who doesn't regularly worship with you? What do we do that even we have forgotten why we do it? Maybe we need to stop that activity, or maybe we need a fresh interpretation of what you are doing. Take some time for reflection; try to see what we do through the eyes of an outsider.

Perhaps recruit someone who has no connection to our church to look at the space and the order of worship and tell us what he/she sees or experiences. Be prepared; the responses might be sobering, or surprising, even shocking. We've learned to look beyond our mess.

Advent is also a penitential season, which means that we aren't just preparing our external space to receive *the Guest* and our guests. We are also preparing our internal space for that reception. Worship, therefore, needs to include both times of reflection and acts of repentance. Spoken and sung prayers of confession can be accompanied by times of prayer in the pews, that give space for and invitation to new commitments. We begin the season of Advent by acknowledging our need to clean house, because "Company's Coming".

Isaiah comes along to ask us to take another look at our living space. Like our mom, Isaiah stands at the door and tells us that company is coming and would you just look at the kind of squalor you're living in. What would happen, the old prophet shouts, if the one you claim to be waiting for were to show up today? What if the one you want to come home, tore open this door right here and came charging into this room? What then?

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," Isaiah cries on our behalf. We know you are present; our faith tells us that you are here. But we need to know it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Shake us up, so that we can be certain again. We've begun to wonder; we've begun to doubt. So, do it again, Lord. Do it again. There is where our historical observance comes in. There is where telling the story becomes so important.

Not just so that we can look back with a sigh and long for the good old days, not so that we can wistfully wish for the blessing that they had back in the day, but so we can learn to recognize it when it comes again. That is the task of Advent, to pay attention to what is and what might be, not simply to look back at what was. The people of God were in exile; the foundations of their nation had been shaken; the comforts that they had begun to take for granted were taken from them.

The human institutions that they had constructed no longer held the security that they had begun to take for granted. So, they began to look elsewhere, and they realized that their faith was shaky as well. They needed a boost, so they looked back; and they looked forward at the same time. The mountains of our society were shaken; so, shake the mountains, O Lord. The foundations of our nation were shaken; so, shake the foundations, O God.

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They needed an Advent upside the head! We remember, they claimed, we remember how you used to deal with us, and we want that again. We want to remember as you remember. The words seem like they were reminding God, but really, they were reminding themselves. The look back was not just to give them a warm feeling about what once was, but a way to spur them to living differently.

Advent is a reminder to get out of our sense of complacency. Though it is hard to be complacent when things are difficult. When all is going well, then we need the two by four of Advent to wake us up. But when things are difficult, we use Advent as a prayer, as a reminder to hope. Believe it or not, that is the call of Jesus in our gospel passage for the week. It is a call to hope. We sometimes must listen hard to hear something hopeful in these descriptions, but it is there. It is underneath sometimes, but still there.

Nervous? Well, yes, because there is much to do and a deadline to meet. But at the same time, there is the promise that the master is near – not as a threat, but as a promise. We are not alone. What we see in front of us is not all there is. History is heading somewhere. We may not know where exactly, except that it is someplace called the kingdom of heaven, or as Jesus was fond of describing it, *life*. And that is what we long for in the end, *life* – life in all its fullness and meaning, life in all its joy and promise.

That's what is coming; that is what is promised. And we forget every now and then. We forget that we are looking for anything, that we are hoping for anything. Until Advent comes and knocks us upside the head with a not-so-subtle reminder. Then we look and see what a mess we're living in, and we need to do something about it, because "Company's Coming!"