

First Sunday of Advent

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on November 30, 2025

Isaiah 2:1-5 / Romans 13:11-14 / Psalm 122 / Matthew 24:36-44

*We thank You, God, for the wilderness.*

*Wilderness is our place.*

*As we wait for the land of promise,*

*teach us the ways of new living, lead us to where we hear Your word most clearly,*

*renew us and clear out the wastelands of our lives,*

*prepare us for life in the awareness of Christ's coming*

*when the desert will sing and the wilderness will blossom as the rose. Amen.*

The juxtaposition of today's readings for the first day in the Church's calendar and last Sunday's readings for Christ the King, the last Sunday in the church's calendar, result in a bit of cognitive dissonance. Last week we celebrated the Reign of Christ with the story of His Crucifixion and the onlookers mocking Him as King of the Jews. This week, the readings focus on the Coming of the Messiah, and He will come at an unexpected time. But aren't we already under the Reign of Christ? Hasn't the Messiah already come?

So it is with Christian theology ... that the Messiah did once come, suffered under human sin, and is to come again. Now, as we read and reflect on scripture, we look back to what was as we look forward to what will be. That is what Advent is: A time of recalling the promises made to us as we anticipate a new era of Christ's Glory.

One interesting bit is the Psalm. It is the basis of the Coronation Anthem "*I was glad*", which has been performed at the coronation of every British Monarch since 1626, with the familiar setting composed by Hubert Parry being performed since the coronation of Edward VII in 1902. In Britain, this piece is not known as a Psalm; it is known for its dedication to the monarch.

Since we know Psalm 122 as a coronation anthem [*yet, it is not categorized as a royal psalm*], it seems that it would have been more suitable last week on the

Feast of Christ the King. However, though we are of a Church that was born out of the Church of England and its monarchs, we are first and foremost subject to scripture without bias to any human king. And this *pilgrimage* Psalm has been inspirational in many contexts. For example, the slaves of the American South, this psalm came with the promise that the God of the Oppressed was always fighting for their liberation, and in God's house there is safety and protection. *THAT* is Advent: living with today's circumstances while knowing from the past that the promise of a glorious future *will* come to fruition. ... What a frustrating position to be in!

I like the season of Advent – *as it is intended in the Church*. I'm not talking about what happens outside the Church: the Christmas parties, the decorations, the Christmas music, Friday's holiday parade. All that is great, too. But as a Christian, the Season of Advent grounds me and focuses me on the "prize".

With the Western practice of celebrating Christmas for an entire month *before* Christmas Day, instead of for 12 days *from* Christmas Day, Sunday mornings during Advent can be filled with either apathy – for those who don't really anticipate a Second Coming of Christ – or anxiety – for those who do anticipate the Second Coming but who also want to sing Christmas songs, especially the secular ones, on their way home from church! And then we are faced with Jesus' foretelling of His apocalyptic return, which puts a damper on everything ... even before it gets started!

But if you reflect deeply on this month's scriptures, we find space for our own faith and hope for what was, what is and what is to come. Jesus reminds us that the catastrophic destruction of the world in the Flood *because of the apathy* of God's people came with a promise of restoration. And while the anticipation of that restoration came with great *anxiety*, it was eventually fulfilled. It was faith and hope that got those few through to the restoration, and Jesus commends that same faith and hope to us as we await the coming of the Messiah.

Advent is a season of *delayed gratification*. Those of you with children know that very well! For 11 months of the year, a child's wants are nothing short of *instant gratification*. And then December comes around, and for 1 month, it's "*You will have to wait until Christmas.*" Saying that out loud makes me realize how unfair that is!

With the delayed gratification that our Advent scriptures are guiding to and guiding us through, we are promised that there will be a glorious gift, but we have no idea when it will come or what it will be.

In my first parish in Manchester in the Northwest of England, I officiated the funeral of a woman who had lived within the parish boundaries and only a couple of blocks from the church. She wasn't a parishioner in the same sense here. In the Church of England, everyone has the right to have their funeral through the parish church, so I didn't know her or her husband.

She and her husband had very active career lives. But in retirement, as can often happen, they ended up very isolated, simply due to an unconscious retreat from public life. Over the years, they socialized less, and they stayed home more often. Their son lived in New Zealand, so they rarely saw him and his family. Their relationship with their daughter, who lived about 150mi away, was a bit strained, so they didn't see her or their grandson.

During my pre-funeral visit with the husband, whose name I don't remember, so I'll call him Nigel, and through what became several post-funeral visits, he opened up about his relationship with religion. He lived across the street from Chorlton Evangelical Church, and he and his wife would occasionally have conversations about religion with the pastor over a cup of tea. He shared bits and pieces of those conversations, and they were very dogmatic in nature, as you might imagine. And when Nigel requested that I visit him again, it was clear that he wanted to talk about religion.

Nigel's interest in Christianity was purely intellectual. He wanted to know everything about God and Jesus and how the Church works *before* he would commit to following Jesus and becoming a Christian. These types of conversations are inevitably strained, because, as human beings, we don't know everything about God, which scripture explicitly reminds us of! These conversations are complicated because any whiff of ambiguity will not satisfy the need for cognitive surety. These conversations are often futile because a water-tight case for why I believe in God and follow Jesus is required, as is justification for the failings of the Church and Christians throughout history. And as a scientist, I get it! But also as a scientist, I just want to say, "*Sometimes you just have to be patient and gather more and different data before it makes any sense.*"

For whatever reason, Nigel came to church one Sunday. He sat through the service. He went to Coffee Hour. And then he said that he would be back the next Sunday. Well, Nigel kept coming to church, and he was eventually Confirmed by the Bishop.

What happened to Nigel was that, after a long *intellectual* search for God, Nigel *experienced* God. His conversations with the evangelical pastor gave him only one particular understanding of God...but without any experiential context. It allowed him to have *apathy* toward faith, but then *anxiety* arose when he sat through his wife's funeral as we commended her to that place that Jesus has prepared for her. He felt God's love, which transcends any intellectual understanding of God. That space and time between his wife's funeral and his Confirmation was what the Season of Advent is. And in that personal Season of Advent, Nigel developed faith and hope, which pushed aside the apathy and anxiety.

Today, in the 21C, with the hindsight of scripture and 2,000 years of exegesis, we can have less apathy and less anxiety as we await the Coming of Jesus...whenever and whatever that will be. We can go back and read the stories of God's promises coming to fruition, and that's what the Church's calendar – of which today is the first day – offers us: a way to be reminded that God's promises are true and real

so that we can push away the apathy and anxiety, and we can live in faith and hope, knowing that God's will will be done in God's own time.

This is true with scripture, and that is true in your own life. You, too, have memories that came with apathy or anxiety; you were unsure if God was working in your life. And then, like with Nigel, God's promise was placed in front of you. Maybe with explanation; maybe without explanation. Your story doesn't have to be as cataclysmic as Noah's! You just have to understand that faith and hope overshadow apathy and anxiety, that God's love through Jesus Christ is ever-present, even though we may not be able to see or feel it.

So, here we are in the Season Advent, the time when we are reminded that, yes, God is here, but there is more to come. Today's readings are urging us to be awake, not to be apathetic or anxious, but to be awake to God's presence and God's work around us. We are to be awake to the present and to what will come in the future.

Each day that we embark upon, we do not know the outcome. But we do have hope that the outcome will be as planned. Paul tells us that that every moment in time is filled with God-inspired possibilities. Isaiah tells us that those God-inspired possibilities will come not with war and strife, but with the peace of a new era, the Peace of Christ. Advent is when we anticipate the new heaven, the new earth, the new way of living, living in God's image as God intended from the beginning.

As you listen to your favorite Christmas album; as you do your Christmas shopping; as you host and attend festive parties; remember that there is a promise of something greater ... in a time we don't know when, and in a form we don't know what. But I bid you that your faith and hope this Advent overcomes your apathy or anxiety, and that you *keep awake* to the possibilities that God has in store for you.