

In the Meantime

Menno Mennonite Church
November 30, 2025

Purpose: To place the hopeful work of waiting into context of faith.

Message: As people of faith, we begin our season of waiting by acknowledging who we wait upon.

Scriptures: Luke 21: 25 – 36 (I will read); Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16a (please read)

Synopsis: Our anticipation is important. We are shaped by what we wait on. But it is also difficult to maintain over time and experience. Waiting and hoping can become more and more demanding when we are so used to the “by and by” of waiting. As such we can struggle to maintain and articulate the hope that Advent invites, always, to refresh and maintain. We hope because we need to hope. In the midst of the ever evolving challenges of a wanting world we hope in order to maintain our anticipation and participation in what God is doing. How we hope becomes part of who we are and what we are living toward.

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars.

On the earth, there will be dismay among nations
in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves.

²⁶ The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken,
causing people to faint from fear and foreboding
of what is coming upon the world.

²⁷ Then they will see the Human One
coming on a cloud with power and great splendor.

²⁸ Now when these things begin to happen,
stand up straight and raise your heads,
because your redemption is near.”

²⁹ Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees.

³⁰ When they sprout leaves,
you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near.

³¹ In the same way, when you see these things happening,
you know that God’s kingdom is near.

³² I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until everything has happened.

³³ Heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will certainly not pass away.

³⁴ “Take care that your hearts aren’t dulled by drinking parties,
drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life.
Don’t let that day fall upon you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap.

It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth.

³⁶ Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough
to escape everything that is about to happen
and to stand before the Son of Man.

It is finally safe to say that it is indeed Christmas time. Never mind that the stores have been trying to convince of this since sometime in October, and that Black Friday has now evolved from the premiere shopping day of the year to more of a rolling season that occupies that latter half of November entirely. It is a season where we are pushed and pulled between the extremes of nostalgia and cynicism. We are encouraged to dream of “White Christmas; just like the one’s I used to know.” Bing and company brings us back to the roots memory that is evoked by the season. I have as strong of memories of Christmas and family even if our Christmas’ generally ran to the unconventional and non-calendar specific given the geography of being away from family. There is plenty of emotional baggage that is shut up in the decorations and bobbles that we pack away for 11 months of the year, and a lot of joy in this.

Yet not all joy to be sure. Nostalgia is a two edged sword and cynicism of the season is rarely improved by merely being reminded to cheer up lest you be compared to a green furry grinch whose heart was 2 sizes to small. Life changes, distances lengthen, those who we care about the most can be estranged or just plain gone. It is not hard for us to hear our hearts ambivalence mixing in there right along with the sweet music all the same.

Yet here we are in this peculiar ritual of advent; the church’s unique and, let’s face it, increasingly peculiar season of anticipation before the main event. Advent is about a lot of things, but nostalgia is not one of them. Which is part of the reason why it doesn’t quite fit the season as we know out there. It might seem that way for all the traditions and hymns that suit the season. We have songs of waiting for the Messiah. *O Come, O com Immanuel, and ransom Captive Israel* is familiar. When we sing this on Christmas among the muted glow we can almost pretend that we are first century Jews, longing for Messiah.

But we’re not. Listen to some more verses:

<i>O come, O key of David, come</i>	<i>O come, O King of nations, bind</i>
<i>And open wide our heavenly home.</i>	<i>In one the hearts of all mankind</i>
<i>Make safe for us the heavenward road</i>	<i>Bid all our sad divisions cease</i>
<i>and bar the way to death’s abode.</i>	<i>And be yourself our King of peace.</i>

We are longing; yes. Daily so. But it is not for a baby born away in the Manger, but for the Son of Man, the Human one to come and complete the work of the kingdom in glory. We are waiting and hoping for the completion of the final redemption of the world. Advent is not about the past, or about re-enacting what has been, but about reminding ourselves about the happenings so long ago. All of that has its place and time, sure, but that is not the point of which we are

working at and not what we are talking about. It is not a call to nostalgia, but rather to its somewhat profound opposite. It is a call to hope. Not that there is anything wrong with a good case of “how it used to be”. We are given to looking back and seeking comfort there. But there isn’t a whole lot of sustenance in looking behind to help us navigate the here and now. What we need is hope. And not the shallow hope of wishing someone a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, but also connecting to the deeper hope that there is something beyond this present moment and well beyond. Nostalgia can warm us; but it is hope that shines despite the darkness.

All of the gospels report that near the end of his earthly life of teaching, Jesus talked about the future. It is not our favorite Sunday fare and we can sometimes try and avoid it. Because they can seem rather oddly out of place. We didn’t read the part of the passage, but this is the way Jesus starts out. “When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”” (21: 5,6) He is talking about the temple; the immutable house of YHWH that would live forever, but his words apply across the board. All these marvelous things of our time and place, the technologically brilliant schemes of how things are and where we are can and will be thrown down. The world as we have built it can and will come apart, and not one processor will be left in place. Jesus is not trying to scare us, though being reminded that what we most trust to be permanent is not really is always enough to make us uncomfortable. He is telling us the bigger truth: the stuff that we build our world upon is not what will last in the cosmic scale. All things are ephemeral and fragile. When you build and hope in bricks and stuff of this world you will be disappointed sooner or later.

We know this deep down. Yet we are exceedingly good at pretending otherwise. We make our plans, our investments, our intentions. We look to our best ideas and plans only to have them come to nothing as the unpredictable comes and spoils in one form or another. Apocalyptic writing—the language of the end—is simply speaking to the revealing of what was true all along of the truest way of things—the way of the kingdom. As uncomfortable as it makes us to sit with it, we know the language of Jesus’s apocalypse. It rings true in our ears. We know the distress of wars and rumors of wars. We hear those who are given to predicting the future be it from the guide of science or the interpretation of prophecy and their diagnosis is rarely “everything is cool and we have nothing to worry about.” We feel the strain of our world in many ways and forms.

You can hear the whispers of fainting, fear, and foreboding in the air even if are not watching the stars and the heavens nightly for the news.

Which is why we cannot do Advent without words like those that we find from the prophets and Jesus. What Jesus brings us here is the true advent language. It is the reminder, seldom pleasant, that the world that we exist within is one that is given to shaking. Every bit as much now as it was 2000 years ago. But it is not the only thing that we need to hear: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption draws near. Advent is not that world is falling to pieces, nor is it that we can ignore things because everything is going to be alright. It’s a whole lot more durable than that. The message of advent is that when the Earth is in upheaval and every star of the compass had come misplaced, and all hell has broken loose, that is when we Lift up our heads to watch for the coming of our redemption. It isn’t the time to hide in your foxhole; it is the time to raise your head in hope. Jesus is reminding us that history is not a function of the predicable outcome of present trends not the projection of our worst fears. History rides where it always has ridden and always will: in the hands of YHWH God who will come neigh and make all things new.

There is something magical about good writing, especially good fiction writing. As much as I admire a well written and research piece of academic writing, there is something detached and sterile to it. But to take a novel and create a world, or a world within a world with its own characters, notions, and ideas within them is a function of inspiration. Rather than a mere escape from the world as it is, a good novel takes on some of the trueness of the world as it is and tries to make sense of it, to redeem it and to make it come into something new and other. Not all stories have to have happy endings, but they can have true endings that can speak far more loudly to the nature of the way of things than other works of art. I’ve heard interviews with novelists who have said things like, “this character just came along and began to assert herself into the story and go her own way.” That doesn’t mean the novelist was the slave of some imaginary character. It means that the character had his or her own reality and freedom. Still it is ultimately the novelist who makes sense out of the characters, out of their nobility or foolishness. It’s the novelist who brings meaning out of the threads of narrative, the twists and turns of the plot. At the end of a good novel we don’t say, “how absurd”, but “I see now, it all hangs together.”

We do well to apply this to God’s hand in history. It is like that here too. God is not singularly controlling of history, no matter how much we might wish it were so if only if we

would have someone to blame when things go wrong. Christians are not saved from anything in this life. Jesus does not spare us from heartache, betrayal, grief, injustice. On any given day we may well find ourselves in the middle of a chapter that we would just as soon not read, or better still, rip from the binding and burn. But the Bible assures us that this world and its seemingly senseless events are ultimately not our story but God's story, and that is a story that we can trust in and hope for beyond ourselves and the bleak outcomes we can write.

This is not without foundation either. Woven through the bleakest moments of human history we also have that of God. Slavery does not last forever but God comes and affects freedom. When and where least expected, God's love came into the world as could have never been predicted or planned; with an infant born in a manger. Even with its greatest arch tragedy of the death of the savior of the world God's plot swallows even the cross into the story of God's redemption if all things.

Advent hope is the capacity to carry within ourselves some of the confidence that this story is the story that we live and not the story with which we are so incurably familiar. It is leaning into the bigger overarching story and that all that we are given can find meaning in God's story. Is this easy to believe? No not always. Most of the time it stretches our credulity well beyond breaking. But that is why advent is an annual practice every bit as much as it is a season of history. It is a practice to remember in what we are waiting and to remember who are waiting for. In the middle of a hope-challenged world the plot thickens and absurdity mounts we know who the author is and to anticipate the completion of God's story in God's time. We are not looking for God in the distance past, at least not singularly so. We are also looking for God out here in the future. Our redemption is ever drawing neigh. This will be the end of the story of a rebellious creation with all its tragic twists woven into all that God is doing in mercy and love.

What do we do in the meantime. We don't need to spend our time on fear and wondering, calculating it all. But simply to live faithfully into the kingdom already here, already now, loving now, worshipping now, serving now, and seeking Christ now. knowing that the great author can write what is best known.

We cannot deny that there is fear and foreboding. We are called to live the kingdom within it, trusting God to be faithful in the end. Advent calls us to look up, and know our redemption continues to come in the shape of Christ Jesus. We look forward to the day when faith will become sight, and the end, all of it, will be revealed. May it be Lord, and soon. Amen.