

1st SUNDAY OF ADVENT – B (December 3, 2023)

First of all, let me wish you all a very happy new year—a new Church year, that is. This weekend we observe the first Sunday of Advent which begins the new liturgical year. In the midst of all the usual ‘busy-ness’ of December, let’s do what we can to remember this sacred Advent season—a special time of waiting and watching. We heard both of those words—‘wait’ and ‘watch’—in the readings today. St. Paul told the Corinthians in part what it means to ‘wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ’. That same Jesus told his disciples more than once about the need to ‘be watchful!...Watch!’

This Advent season challenges us to wait, to be watchful, on three levels. Probably the first thing we think of regarding this season is that we wait, we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas. For the youngsters among us, that waiting can be hard—the Christmas decorations are up, the presents start showing up under the Christmas tree, the excitement builds, and they wonder “will Christmas ever come??” When I was growing up, we always had our family celebration on Christmas Eve. First we had supper (with plenty of kolaches and rollicky, of course). But after supper, we still had to wait to open presents until all the dishes were washed, dried, and put away—it seemed to take forever. Oh, the agony we had to suffer during all that waiting...

Yes, Advent does involve preparing to celebrate Jesus’ birth—looking back to that blessed event in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. But we don’t zero in on that event right away; that becomes our focus in the second half of Advent. During these first two weeks of Advent we turn our attention to the future and to Jesus’ second coming at the end of time and bringing the human race and all of creation to its eternal fulfillment. That’s the waiting that Paul mentioned in the second reading; that’s the watchfulness that Jesus spoke about in the gospel: “Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.” This is the same message we heard the last few weeks as we closed out the last church year, isn’t it? The reminder of Jesus’ second coming provides a smooth transition between the end of one liturgical year and the beginning of the new. Jesus will in fact come again, and we don’t know when it will take place—perhaps tomorrow, perhaps 10,000 years from now. Because we don’t know, we need to be mindful and watchful and prepared on a daily and lifelong basis.

So the waiting and watchfulness that we are called to in a special way in this new Advent season looks both forward to Jesus’ second coming and backward to his first coming when we was born of Mary. But there is still more to Advent than looking into the future and into the past. Advent also challenges us to be aware and watchful of Jesus’ presence to us here and now and how he longs to be with us and within us in ever deeper, stronger, and more personal ways. Consider just a few of the many and life-changing ways Jesus comes to us:

- he comes to us through his word, through the scriptures and especially through the four gospels. Do you take the time, do you make the time to read and pray these sacred writings? We hear and follow along with the readings here at Mass, and that’s certainly a good thing. But how about at home? I’m guessing that most if not all of you have a family Bible at home; does it get read, does it get used? Or is it just collecting dust? Read it! Take some time to savor the words, to reflect and be challenged by them, and to pray with them. You don’t have to be a scripture scholar to do so!
- Jesus is present to us in the sacraments he gave us for our growth in holiness, and especially through the sacraments of Eucharist and penance/reconciliation/confession. The Eucharist is Jesus Christ himself in the fullness of his Body, Blood, soul, and divinity. There is no stronger, more powerful, or more intimate way that our Savior comes to us than when we receive him into our own bodies at Holy Communion. And he is present to us in the fullness of his being

when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed for adoration on our altars. I strongly recommend that you come to our regular monthly Holy Hours of Eucharistic adoration; Jesus waits for us to be in his presence so he can strengthen us even more with his grace and peace. And confession? I've spoken to you many times about the healing power and grace of this sacrament and how it helps us to become more like Jesus which is why he gave us this sacrament in the first place. There are lots of extra times that I'll be available for confessions during this Advent season; I'd love to be very busy during all those times!

You may remember earlier this year when I told you about two fortune cookies. One said "Your charm is irresistible", and yes—I'm still having a whole lot of fun with that one! But the other one is really true and most important: "Focus on your long-term goal." Whatever personal goals you have for your own life or that of your family, God has made every single one of us with one ultimate goal in mind: eternal life, peace, and joy with him in his kingdom. The more we remember and focus on that goal, the more we are watchful and alert for the ways that Jesus is present to us, the more joy and peace we will know in this life. So let's indeed be watchful and alert—let's be conscious of all the ways Jesus makes himself known to us and how much he wants us to find our joy in him.