

December 1, 2024, First Sunday in Advent, at St. Michael's Church  
The Reverend Joshua Wong

*Focus:* Advent prepares us for the coming of good news, and the anticipation of his return.

*Function:* I'm preaching this message to my congregation to remind them that Jesus' birth is only half of the good news, the second is that Christ will return.

Let us pray: *Lord, help us to await your birth with joyfulness, for you alone make all things new. Amen.*

I don't know about you, but this year seems to have flown by. I started here as your rector in the middle of February when your supply priest had COVID, than I officially began on March 1. A lot has happened at St. Michaels since then. We had a baptism, our new website is up, we had Lent, Easter, summer social and a summer roundtable. We had two catechism classes and a burial service. And next May, we have five parishioners who will be confirmed and received by the Bishop at St. John's Cathedral. Together, we just celebrated Thanksgiving, and the world is gearing up for Christmas. Christmas trees are appearing on the rooftops of SUVs, and holiday sales seem to get earlier and earlier rebadged with different names such as Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday, and Super Saturday, and don't forget the weekly holiday specials at Costco that entice us to shop till we drop!!

So, is this what November and December is about? Good to know that it is not.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, where we begin a four-week journey toward Christmas day. During these weeks, I invite you to seek out two of the promises of this anticipatory season—the promise of hope and the promise of joy.

Seeking is the key, because if we don't, we'll be caught up in the frenzied rhythm of the secular celebration that makes us forget what Advent and Christmas is all about. Even though the promises of The Advent season may seem elusive to us amidst all the chaos, stopping to practice gratitude can bring focus back into this season. Gratitude for what, you might ask? We'll find out together.

What the Advent season does is to slow us down from jumping from Thanksgiving into the chaos of Christmas celebrations. I remember growing up in the Evangelical tradition in which we never celebrated Advent. From Thanksgiving Day, we immediately anticipated Christmas day. Then, on December 26, the Christmas spirit was over, the Christmas decorations were put away, and then onto new years day with the Rose Parade. But for Episcopalians, it's not over after Christmas day. For us, we continue the hope of Christmas all the way to January 6, when we begin the season of Epiphany. As the name implies, during the Epiphany season, we discover and become

enlightened by the life of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Advent sets us on a rhythm to prepare us for the life of Jesus.

As I mentioned, today is the first Sunday of Advent. What is the origin of the Advent celebration?

There is no exact date when the Advent season originated, but we know that it was in existence from about 480. For Western Christians of the Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican traditions, Advent signifies preparation for the threefold coming of Christ: first, in the incarnation at Bethlehem, then in the sacramental presence in the Eucharist, and thirdly at his Second Coming and final judgment.

In our churches, we often focus primarily on the first and second parts, but neglect to speak about the Second Coming, which is equally vital. However, the theme of our lectionary readings during Advent relates to both the first coming of Jesus Christ as well as his Second Coming as judge.

An example of The Second Coming narrative is found in the Gospel lesson for today. Jesus says that when God's will is fulfilled here on earth, there will be signs when Christ will return. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

The next idea found in this passage that makes the season of Advent so important is to be prepared. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with careless living and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.” This warning reminds us to be prepared because one day we will all stand before the Son of Man. The end times, or by its technical term, eschatology, is when we believe that God has a divine plan for everything. Because the image is so elusive, we tend to easily dismiss its existence, or live in denial of the fact. But take heart, in our Gospel passage today it says, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

During Advent, many churches and Christian homes mark the season with a wreath, which consists of four candles—typically three violet ones and one rose-colored one. The first candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent, and the following week the first and second candles are lit, and so on. This tradition began in the 19th century and had its origins in the 16th century. Each candle is symbolic of *hope, peace, joy, and love*. Today’s candle represents hope.

Another historical fun tradition that came out of Advent was the Advent calendar. In the 19th century, a secular custom was established by a Munich

housewife who was tired of having to answer endlessly when people kept asking her when Christmas would come. So, she invented the Advent calendar providing 24 openings, one to be opened each day beginning December 1. It was so well received that the first commercial calendars were printed in Germany in 1851, and often revealed a chocolate or other treats behind each window.

Ultimately, Advent is a tradition to mark the rhythm of time and anticipation, a time to remember what is to come. Because Advent falls in the quiet days of winter, it is a time to be silent, to reflect and reminisce about the coming of a baby who will be the savior of the world, AND, of the hope of his return one day to renew a new heaven and a new earth. As you can see, Advent and Christmas offers us a lot to be grateful.

From the first story to the last, the Bible is full of narratives, poetry, prophecy, biographies, and personal letters that inform our understanding of Advent. The Bible is full of anticipatory remembrances. When the Bible speaks about humans waiting for the promised anointed King who would deliver them, it speaks to us about hope in their anticipation (Amos 9:11-13). When we read about people choosing joy and hope in God's promises despite their circumstances, the meaning of Advent can take on a deeper meaning (Isa. 9:6-7, 11:1-5; Luke 1:26-2:20). And when the New Testament talks about a second

advent, the return of Jesus, we can join in that time of waiting, shared by Christians throughout history (Rev. 21:1-5). And today, amidst our fast pace modern life, the Advent anticipation comes in the form of the Holy Eucharist.

We need the comfort of the Advent season of hope, because our modern life in 2024 is pretty crazy. Today, there are many world leaders who seem to defy truth and lawlessness. Information and change is happens in lightening speed, and there is no time to see if something is true.

But if you look up the word “advent,” you will find that it means the anticipation of the beginning of an event, of something or someone that will bring new development, new ideas, or advancements into our world. For us, this came with the arrival of a person name Jesus. Although he came to us as a baby, his coming was for the purpose of radically changing the world, turning authority and injustice upside down. Even in his time, in the midst of unrighteousness, and amidst people who hated him, he turned the world upside down with his teaching of radical love. And friends, his work of radical reconciliation, and reformation did not end after his ascension, but it continues today until God’s purpose of salvation is completed for humanity and all of creation.

You may share my hopelessness at times with the state of our world. All of humanity and creation seem to be crying out for God's return, and for healing. Romans chapter 8 says, "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." We may wonder how much longer until we see justice? But it's precisely here that the God of grace will arrive, and it's precisely here that we as a community of believers are called to light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love.

Advent and Christmas is a reminder that God's work on earth is not over, Jesus continues to turn unrighteousness upside down with radical hope. We hold onto the hope that whatever happens in the future, God reigns.

Advent prepares our hearts with the rhythm of hope, peace, joy and love. Next time you feel the stress of this season, DON'T forget that it is not about the perfect party, or the perfect gift. We already received the perfect gift of Jesus Christ. Let us pause to give thanks for Advent and Christmas. Advent and Christmas dinners and gift boxes will come and go, but the *hope, peace, joy and love* from God remains with us throughout the year. May those candles light our way throughout this hopeful and sacred time. *Amen.*