

## *Advent 2009*

*This sermon was preached by the Rev. Richmond Webster on Sunday, November 29, 2009 and is based Luke 21:25-36.*

In the fall of 1914, the crew of a ship called the “Endurance” set out from their home port in England in order to lead an expedition across the continent of Antarctica. They never made it. Instead, it took almost three years for them to return in what has been called the most daring and unlikely rescue of the past century. It happened this way:

Before they reached Antarctica, the “Endurance” became trapped in sea ice, ice that would slowly crush and sink the ship. Led by their captain, Sir Ernest Shackleton (a man they all simply called the boss), the crew took what they could and set out on foot across the frozen sea. From there, they did what they could to survive; they hunted, built fires, played soccer.

The crew reached a tiny island before the spring thaw, but they were too far away from sea lanes and fishing boats. If they were to be saved at all a decision would have to be made. If they were to be saved at all, the boss would have to leave them using a life boat from the ship and crossing the most dangerous ocean on the planet. So they gathered on the beach to bid their farewell. The boss would be their only hope, and the men would have to wait...

This story seemed a good way to begin our season of Advent here at Saint Luke’s because Advent is about waiting. The word “Advent” literally means “the coming” and this season is intended to get us thinking and feeling like those men on the beach.

And lets be honest; it wouldn’t hurt us to wait these days. After all, the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade is past and we are full speed and full steam into the most wonderful time of the year. Christmas is everywhere, with lots of Christmas shopping to do, Christmas movies to see, Christmas lights to hang, Christmas music to play. Please don’t misunderstand, I love it. This time of year is so fun. But it can be exhausting.

Here, in the quiet of this church and with an altar the color of a winter’s night sky, we can be reminded that there is more to our story than tinsel and candy canes and the babe in a manger. I’ll say it again; Christmas is wonderful, Christmas is sentimental, Christmas is coming—but Jesus is coming too, just as he said. He is coming with power and great glory, and this is why we wait. We are on the beach, you and I, waiting for the boss to return.

This is also why we read from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Luke, verses that take place just before the wheels fall off for Jesus and his friends. Keep reading the story, and you will find Jesus betrayed by one of his friends, denied by another, arrested by his enemies, beaten, crucified, and after rising again leaving them to wait for another return.

And here, we learn the wait will not be easy. They will suffer, Jesus told them. At times they will feel helpless and afraid and completely, cosmically out of control, and the same is true for us.

If this past decade has taught us anything, we've learned something about losing control. These past ten years have given us 9-11, two foreign wars, a disastrous Hurricane, a failing economy, and these are just the big stories on the evening news.

We have never been more polarized and divided as a nation, more confused, more suspicious, and for this reason the wait is so important for us. Jesus promised he will come again, and so the wait is part of the story, part of our story.

I'll explain: If we know he is coming, we can live expectantly, believing with all our hearts that the world can be better, must be better, and the wait will make us better somehow—more alert, more grateful, more dependent, more compassionate, more active, as we wait for our King to return and save us all.

I'm fond of telling a story this time of year. Back when I was rector of St. John's in Decatur, I entered a float on behalf of our church in the Decatur Christmas parade. This parade passed right by our church. Remember this is small town Alabama, with no need for cultural sensitivity when it comes to Christmas versus the holidays. This parade was filled, alongside high School bands and Shriners in their little cars, with churches on display from all over the county, with floats to invite the faithful and proclaim the reason for the season.

Apparently, it had never occurred to my stately Episcopal congregation to actually join the parade; Our gift to the city was a dignified and beautiful service of Advent lessons and carols. Still, I thought it would be a hoot for us to join in, and so we entered our own Christmas float, complete with a flat bed trailer, generator for twinkling lights, artificial tree, cotton ball snow, and children singing silent night. For a first year float, I thought it looked pretty good.

I thought this until we were lined up behind the Hillsboro Baptist church, which happened to win the ribbon that year. Their theme (and yes, they had a theme) was "Christmas in the Country" and it featured a wooden church complete with adult choir, preacher, lots of real poinsettias, a steeple and a bell.

One of my colleagues looked at that float as we drove our puny contribution behind, looked at ours again, ruefully shook his head and remarked, "Rich, if we had just one more day..."

Since then I have imagined what it would be like if we had entered an Advent float that day. Not a Christmas float, mind you, but an Advent float, with nothing on it save people, friends in community, all looking at the night sky and waiting...

...an Advent float, with friends in community waiting and hoping for Christ to come again and save us, save us from death, yes, but also to save us from cynicism and despair and our own low expectations; an Advent float, with friends in community rolling up their sleeves and working for this coming of the King; an advent float, with friends in community not satisfied the world as it is, but seeking to dry all tears, end all wars, fill all bellies, protect the weak, give shelter to the homeless, strive for justice, and freedom and peace; an Advent float, with friends in community longing for the Son of Man to come with power and great glory.

I'll say this again; Christmas is wonderful, Christmas is beautiful, Christmas is sentimental. We will celebrate Christmas in time. But remember that Christmases come and go. During Advent, we wait for something that is yet to come; we wait each day for the king to save us, to make this world right, and in waiting together we make this our song: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Which reminds me to finish telling the story: Some five months after the boss left his men on the beach, a speck appeared on the horizon. It was a rescue ship, and the boss was on board, though the journey to find help nearly killed him.

As the castaways poured on the beach at the sight of this ship, the boss stood on deck, staining through his binoculars and with tears streaming down his cheeks. He counted them as he cried, saying, "They are all there! They are all there!" Not a man was lost.

The king will save us. This is meaning of Advent. The King will return. Hang on, watch and wait.