

## Alex Cain

Well, happy New Year, friends. Today's the first Sunday of Advent, which means that we're starting a new church calendar, a new liturgical year, and advent kicks us off. We enter into the story of God's people once more, which is what the liturgical seasons do. They invite us to participate in the story of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, followed by Jesus sending the spirit on Pentecost and the church living into its mission in ordinary time.

That's the shape of our liturgical calendar from Advent to Christmas, epiphany season to lent, Easter, Ascension Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, and then to Ordinary Time. And we end the Ordinary Time, the church year with Christ the King Sunday, which was last week where we saw a subversive image of the King. Our king wore a crown of thorns, not a crown of jewels.

Our king was lifted up on a cross, not placed upon an ornate throne. And this kind of subversiveness is common to the Christian faith. We read that the first will be last. In the last will be first. Jesus tells us, blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, and the persecuted. Those who humble themselves will be exalted, and those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

Everything is not as it seems. Or another way of saying it's the way of Christ is not the way of the world. So it is fitting then. The advent is a bit of an odd and subversive season itself. The word advent, coming from a Latin word which means coming, speaks to us about waiting. And we know that we are waiting on the coming of Jesus.

It is the season of anticipation of Christmas or its lesser known title, the feast of the incarnation. When Jesus comes to be with us by being born of the Blessed Virgin Mary. But as we heard in our text, read this morning in the prayers and the reading of the advent candle, the arrival that is in view for us is not that of the baby Jesus, but the resurrected, glorified Jesus.

Interestingly, we find ourselves in a sort of parallel state of ignorance anticipation along with ancient Israel. They were waiting for the Messiah, who would be their king, a king who would overthrow the Roman oppressors and establish Jerusalem as God's fortified city once again. And

the Messiah did come. But his coronation ceremony, as it were, looks very different than what they had expected.

The crown of thorns and the throne of torture. As we've said, it's subversive, unexpected, the way of Christ. And we, on the other hand, anticipate baby Jesus during this time, lowly in a manger. We sing Hark the herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn King in anticipation. So still a king. Yes, we seek but a king that we celebrates.

With jingle bells and presents and joyful light displays. But unexpected as it is. We get to church this morning and finds that we're anticipating the coming not of a newborn king, but of a reborn king back from death, victorious over the grave, a king who comes in judgments of both the living and the dead. Our creed tells us it's subversive, unexpected, the way of Christ.

An Anglican priest named Tish Harrison Warren, who would help for a little book called Advent The Season of Hope. It's a tiny little thing. I recommend it to you heartily. It's part of a series that goes through each of the seasons of our liturgical year and helps enrich, explain, and deepen your worship. But in this book, she says she came to Anglicanism in her late 20s, and she says, when I first began to practice advent, my focus was almost entirely on preparing for Christmas.

I was surprised to discover, however, the advent is uncomfortably and unavoidably apocalyptic, more concerned with a vast cosmic battle than dashing through the snow in a one horse open sleigh. You see, friends, historically, the church has practiced advent with an emphasis on Christ's Second coming instead of his first. And yet, lest anyone cry Scrooge, it is still the season which precedes and anticipates Christmas.

There's a sort of double entendre going on in advent, we find while we put on, we inhabits, we participate in the story, for that is what the liturgical calendar is for. It's not to merely tell us something that we already know to retell the story. It's to break down the barriers of the play, as it were. We no longer look at the story of actors performing it for us, but we become actors ourselves, participating in the story, living it's once again.

And so as we participate in the story of Israel's waiting for her Messiah, we wait in our own time for the Messiah to return when he will put all things right. Finally, because the baby in the manger and the coming King and glory are one in the same. One of the ways that we see these two weightings converge is in the theme of lights and darkness, which runs all through our readings and prayers for today.

In the Old Testament, there's a prophecy about those who walk in darkness and dwell in a land of deep darkness. Who will one day see a great light. They will be drawn to this light, and it will set them free from the darkness all around them. And in our passage from Isaiah, that prophecy gets picked up. We are told of a time when all the nations of the earth will stream into God's city and learn from God and walk in his pants.

And you can see in your bulletin that it ends with this exhortation. Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. And then we turn to our reading from Romans, which tells us to wake from sleeping. Drawing us out of that darkness. Weak from sleeping for salvation is near. Paul goes on to say, we must lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

This is where our call gets that language, which says the exact same thing. And finally, we see in our gospel passage Jesus instructing his disciples to keep watch for him to stay awake. For I am coming again. He uses the image of a thief breaking into a house in the night. And naturally, Jesus says that if the homeowner knew when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake.

He would have been ready. He would have stopped the thief from breaking in. And then Jesus turns to them and says, therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. This theme of lights in darkness is where advent finds us. It finds us in the darkness of this world, and it offers hope to us.

You and I were lost and we didn't know the way. We were stuck in the darkness of sin, corruption and oppression. We had no light of our own to get us out of this darkness. We did not know who we were or whose we were. We needed somebody to come along and tell us a story that we couldn't tell ourselves.

And through that revelation, the light of Christ has dawned upon us. The bright morning star has shown on our faces. And let us out of that darkness, out of the bondage of sin. And now you and I get a foretaste of what will someday be the reality for all of creation. We get to walk in the freedom of Christ.

As Isaiah puts it, we get to walk in the light of the Lord. As Romans put it, we have put off the works of darkness and put on the armor of lights. No more do we have to be a slave to drunkenness. No more do we have to turn inward and fester in jealousy of others. No more do we have to try to rescue ourselves, try to give our life meaning from our own power, from our own intellect, from our own innovation?

For you and I get to declare, I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. That is who you are, friends. That is who you are. And yet, and yet there is still waiting to be done, isn't there? We know that this world is not yet what it one day will be. We still deal with the darkness. We fight against cancer.

We grieve our family. Estrangement. Poverty still exists in the blessings of things like the angel tree are still needed. The people are still divided all around the world. War still rages. The vulnerable are attacked. Authorities abused power. And you and I, we get caught up in all of its, in this tangled web of darkness that still has a hold on this world's.

And often we do so unknowingly. If you want to know about what's going on in the world, the darkness of what's going on in the world, the prayers of the people are a great place to be for we. We pray in our prayers of the people for the poor and the oppressed, the unemployed, the destitute, for prisoners and captives.

And then we pray also for all of those in danger and violence, oppression and degradation. And we do this because this is what's going on. Whether or not we know in the world's we pray for the welfare of this earth, that God has given us, so that we would steward it, that we use its resources rightly for him, for says, for one says, we would conserve the earth that God has given us, and yet we are caught up in this tangled web of darkness.

We are unaware of the precious metal mines that use slave labor, so that we can have our new iPhone or other electronics. We don't know about the fresh water that is wasted every time we use ChatGPT or another AI, or the demands that it creates for massive data centers that are built in and ruin already struggling communities.

We get tossed to and fro as we get duped by lies about the genocide happening around the world's. We're unaware of the insidious creep of authoritarianism that is rising all over the globe. The world's, my friends, is a mess. And that's why I say there's an untangled web of darkness that still rings. It's sticky and we get stuck in that web, oftentimes unknowingly.

We're lost in the darkness and are in desperate need of the one who comes to us and says, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. These problems that plague us in our neighbors, both locally and globally, are too big for any one of us to solve, but not for Jesus, not for the one who is the light and expels the darkness.

So until his coming again, we walk in the foretaste of his light. It is as if Jesus reaches into the here and now, and shines the lights of his glory through us, through the church, through His word, through the sacraments that he comes in, meets us, and empowers us to do his work. And by the power of the spirit, we put off the works of darkness, and we put on the armor of lights.

We get that foretaste of lights in the darkness. Now.

One of the greatest preachers of the Episcopal Church is the Reverend Fleming Rutledge, and she is very passionate about advent and about the lights in the darkness. She recommends all sorts of reading for advent. I don't know if you've ever read, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. It's a very dark book, but it's an excellent example of what advent means living in a dark time, looking with hope to the future.

But to illustrate this point, a few years ago, she posted on social media that she suggested reading an article about the war in Ukraine which highlighted the Ukrainian children's choir of a church there. Here's an excerpt from that article.

Learning new songs at home was a challenge that provided an escape from the constant ringing of air raid sirens. It also gave choir members an outlet for the intense emotions they were experiencing. Aleksandra Lute Sak, age 20, said the war had deeply affected her music. Now, when she sings, she said she sees the faces of five friends who died in the war.

Sometimes she imagines the experience of a friend captured by Russian soldiers. When rehearsing folk songs, she envisions, envisions destroyed homes with new roofs, collapsed walls, everything burned down, and people standing around who have nowhere to spend the winter.

These songs reminds me of pain, she says. But they somehow also help me deal with that pain.

These songs reminds me of pain, of the darkness that is all around her, she says. But the songs, these worship songs, looking to Jesus somehow helps her deal with that pain. As well. It's a small light in the darkness of the world. It is the hope of what is to come. Or better yet, of who is to come.

This is where advent finds us. On the dark streets of our community. And it shows us that the small joy of lights on houses and trees are meant to point us to the hope of a greater light yet to come. We anticipate the birth of our Savior, yes, but we also anticipate his coming again to set all things right.

And share some more. And says elsewhere in her book, we begin our Christian year in waiting. We do not begin with our own frenetic efforts or energy. Would you not begin with the merriment of Christmas or the triumph of Easter? We do not begin with the work of the church or the mandate of the Great Commission. Instead, we begin in a place of yearning.

We wait for our King to come. So happy New Year, friends. This is advent. Keep watch, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. Amen.