

## **ADVENT INSTRUCTIONS**

I Thessalonians 5:12-24

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In the church year, today is New Year's Day. This is the beginning of the church year, Advent Week One. In the church year we have seasons that don't have anything to do with weather or with the length of the days. The seasons of the church year are marked by the way in which we read scripture throughout the year, and the way we remember the events of Jesus' life. Advent, which means arrival, is the season in which we think about Jesus' birth and what his life meant. Some of the scripture we read during Advent tells us that at the time of Jesus there was an expectation that the world, as people knew it, was about to change dramatically. One of the reasons people were looking for a Messiah is that the coming of the Messiah would signal the end of the world as they knew it.

Now we hear of people every now and then who still talk like that. They predict when the world will end. They see signs in current events. We label them kooks, and we laugh at them, especially when their predictions don't come true. In Jesus' time this kind of thinking - apocalyptic thinking - was more prevalent. Many believe that Jesus himself thought that there was about to be a major upheaval in the world. During Advent, we read some of the passages that talk about the expectation of a great change in the world. So when we talk about Advent, and about arrivals and expectations, we're talking about two things at the same time. We're looking forward to the celebration of Christmas and so we appropriately focus our thoughts on Jesus. But we also think about what it would mean for

the world to change dramatically, what it would be like for the kingdom to actually come...words we pray every Sunday. This isn't some Hollywood version of the end of the world with doom and gloom; this is the world as it would be if God's values were fully embodied, not just by one person named Jesus, but by more and more of us.

Now imagine what it was like for the early Christians. They all believed that overwhelming change was at hand. They recognized Jesus as the sign of this new era which had come into being. But after Jesus' earthly life was over, what changed? Well, there was the church, for one thing. There were people who kept alive the stories of Jesus, the stories he told and the story he lived. These were people whose lives seemed different. They ate together, they shared their possessions, they seemed to live with more light, more hope. But beyond that, the world's problems remained. The Roman Empire still held a tight grasp on money and power and military might, so that the poor had little chance of getting ahead.

As soon as Paul would start a church, he would begin to hear grumbling. "But you said Jesus was coming back. You said the Kingdom of God was coming." Years went by, and nothing changed, and people began to lose faith.

So Paul writes these words. It's more than a pep talk, it's more than encouragement, it's not exactly scolding. This is some of the most straightforward language that the Bible contains. You don't need a Bible commentary to understand what Paul means here. Paul is telling the Christian community what their behavior should look like. Even though you don't like God's timing, Paul says, your call, your job, your vocation is to live out what you say you believe. You do these things. You rejoice always, you pray all the time, you help the weak, you exercise patience, you pay attention to what other

people need, you look for the best in others. And when you do these things, you will find yourself becoming a different person, a holy and whole person. Because our behavior shapes us. It forms our character. It makes us who we are.

Paul is calling the community to focus on their everyday living. Do you know the word, “praxis?” Praxis is the process by which an idea, or a theory, or a belief is put into action. One philosopher has said that human beings achieve their highest level of existence when we combine our beliefs with our actions. Paul is calling us to praxis. Put into practice the things you say you believe.

It strikes me that the season of Advent is the perfect time to practice one or more of the instructions Paul gives in this passage from Thessalonians. Think of all the people you will be interacting with in the next 25 days. The sales clerks, the postal workers, the UPS deliverers, the wait staff at restaurants when you meet friends for a holiday lunch, the baristas, the bartenders, the florists, the caterers. What difference would it make if you put Paul’s words into practice, and really paid attention to all the people who will be serving you...whether at Costco or Giant Eagle or Starbucks or Target. Paul says, “reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other’s nerves you don’t snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.”

Advent is the perfect time to remember that wise quote which says, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

Many of the people around us are the walking wounded. Our nation itself is wounded from too much violence, racism’s scars that keep reopening and are not healing,

a gap between the rich and the poor which leaves a chasm into which people's hopes disappear.

What do we do about it, as God's people? How do we bear the light of Christ as we live our daily lives? How do we bring more hope into the world?

The answer is different for each of us. Some of us are called to simply attend to living our own lives with more integrity, achieving that sense of holiness and wholeness which Paul describes. Others of us are called to focus on acts of loving kindness to those nearest to us, to friends and family, to children with special needs, to aging parents. Some of us are called to political activism.

All of us are called to create a beloved community, right here, to be a sign that things can be different. Not that we're perfect, that's not the point. But if we can be an example of love and compassion, of respect for one another despite our differences, then we can keep Jesus' good news alive. Maybe it could happen for us the way it happened in this story.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order, but because of persecution, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi occasionally used for a hermitage. The old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods" they would whisper. It occurred to the abbot that a visit the rabbi might result in some advice to save his monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained his visit, the rabbi could say, "I know how it is" . "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other. "It has been wonderful that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. But, I can tell you that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?"

"The rabbi said something very mysterious, it was something cryptic. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant?"

In the time that followed, the old monks wondered about the significance of the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real

nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

The Messiah is coming...let us prepare our community to be a sign of that light and hope.