

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC December 1, 2019
Advent 1st Sunday of Year A Mt 24:37-44

It doesn't take very long for a newcomer to New York City to realize that there are some basic "survival skills" that the urban dweller has to acquire and master. Surely vigilance, a watchful eye, is one of the most important. Advent, the season of the church year we have just begun to observe, is a time for vigilance, for watchfulness. The themes of waiting and watching that we focus on the Advent season are to be incorporated into our lives as Christian throughout the year, and not discarded along with the holiday wrappings on Christmas morning.

Still, words like waiting and watching are not ones that go down easily in our contemporary society. Waiting and watching seem to commend a passivity that would have us shirk the responsibility of giving some direction and shape our lives. What may come to mind when linking Advent with waiting may be a play like Samuel Becket's "Waiting for Godot." In this play, no one ever arrives, no answers are ever given, only interminable chatter before a backdrop of impenetrable silence. One waits and waits and waits and nothing happens.

Advent is saying something different. Advent presumes an openness, an aura of expectancy, a value to hanging in there, and staying with it, even when answers are not readily available. Advent invites us to remember that at times we are indeed powerless to effect any change in our lives, and the lives of those with whom we live. Advent presents a counter-voice to our very manipulating, technological society, a voice that counsels patience—not waiting in despair—but waiting for the right moment, so as to seize upon it and then act. Waiting and watching can lead us to truths we would never have discovered by relying upon our more usual aggressive approach to life.

Too often we confront events, people, life itself with a frame of mind that is cast in concrete. We tend to live our lives running on some kind of automatic pilot. We have our minds made up with what we have learned from those truisms that we have stumbled upon, slogans that we have picked up in magazines, in songs, on TV and radio talk shows. Those slogans become the stars with which we set our course in life, and then we run the risk that that set of answers will be all that we need to get by. On automatic pilot, soaring through life, we presume to know our destination and the terrain below. It's all figured out. It's not until we collide with some uncharted mountain, until some unforeseen calamity or even a blessing should strike us, that we are thrown out of the fixed pattern we have set for ourselves.

Advent reminds us that there are times when all we can do is wait and watch; that we lie to ourselves if we presume we have another choice. Advent reminds us of the value of patience, of simply waiting things out. It may be waiting through the terrible silence of God wherein all one's efforts in prayer seem to lead only to a blank wall. It may mean waiting through the difficult days of a marriage, of a relationship. Advent means waiting through disappointments and frustrations that would seem to deny one's talents and abilities—to wait with confidence about one's vocation, one's career, one's calling. It may mean for children or teenagers to wait until their parents finally get smart, and for parents to wait to their children to get some sense, until both discover where true wisdom lies. Advent warns us not to be so aggressive in our search for "answers," for if we search with a closed mind, we will only discover what we knew already. Advent reminds us that the best solution is sometimes found by just keeping quiet, and not proscribing too quickly our own prefabricated solutions. Advent reminds us that simply waiting is not always waiting in vain or twiddling our thumbs idly; that if I am, indeed, attentive and aware of what is going on, I may discover something I never bargained on, but something truly beneficial.

Those of us inclined to want to take charge of things, to be in the driver seat, need to be reminded of the message of Advent—to wait and watch. Others, inclined too much to the other extreme, i.e., to let events take their toll, without taking the necessary action, may look to Advent simply to ratify their own sloth, their own lack of initiative, their own timidity. Just as we can be too active, too controlling, too domineering, so also we can be too passive, too submissive, too pliant to events and people. We always have the preserve that harmony, the balance, the necessary tension between the opposites of passivity and activity, between powerlessness responsibility, between knowing when to "zip" and when to "zap." Advent warns us not to succumb to the fantasy that the world is like one giant Burger King—that we can always "have it our way."

Advent is focused on our celebration of the birth of the Christ Child. So, the metaphor or image of a mother-to-be, pregnant with the child growing in her womb is appropriate for this time of the year. A mother is acutely aware of all the stirrings of the baby, and all she can do is wait, and watch for the moment when all the waiting has come to an end, and the baby is to be born. So, too, we wait and watch, looking for the opportunities, the occasions, where we can act to do what is right, what is fair, what is kind.