

It's About Time

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Jer. 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

My brother had a really corny sense of humor, and as an adolescent, he had a little routine he liked to do. Whenever some unsuspecting person asked him what he wanted to be when he graduated, instead of answering "a doctor" or "an engineer," he would say, "A lert." Of course, his victim would ask him to clarify, then he would say, "Well, the other day I saw this sign that said "Be Alert," so that's what I want to be: A LERT. (Pause for groans)

Advent calls us to "Be Alert" for the coming of Christ. Maybe that makes you want to groan, too. Certainly the mere thought of getting ready for Christmas elicits dread in many stalwart hearts. For those of us past the magic age of anticipating Santa's arrival, the approach of Christmas conjures visions not of sugarplums but of crowded malls and long lines at the post office.

The way Luke describes the coming of Christ, it isn't anything to look forward to, either. Quite the reverse: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations caused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. . . . When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:25-26, 31).

It doesn't sound like something you want to sneak up on you. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in *The Message*: "Be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap." (Luke 21:34).

Yikes! This is a sobering vision. But Advent is not meant to scare us out of our wits. This scary eschatological vision of the coming of Christ at the end of time reminds us that Christ's coming into human history shakes up everything and shifts the world on its axis. It challenges us to simplify and prioritize our lives in anticipation of that event.

Advent is about time—human time and God's time. In Advent we use calendars and candles to mark the time of waiting. And that world-changing thing we are waiting for is a radical shift in the way we experience time. It's a shift from *chronos* to *kairos*, from quantitative time to that qualitative time that brings eternity to a single moment. We usually talk as if all time is the same. But we all know that thirty minutes in the dentist's chair is in no way equivalent to thirty minutes with someone you love. The same number of minutes might tick by on the clock, but the same interval that seems like an eternity in the dentist's chair seems like a brief instant with a beloved.

The time we usually live in is *chronos*, the sort of time that's chopped up into hours, minutes and seconds, like that ticking watch face on *60 Minutes*. Chronological time takes its name from Kronos, the father of the Greek gods who devoured his children. Many of us know the feeling that we are slowly being eaten alive by time, and every now and then the thought occurs to us that maybe God didn't mean for us to live like this. So the good news is that there is another kind of time, *kairos*, God's redeemed time—unmeasured, without end.

Those of us in our working and child-rearing years especially feel the constant pursuit of *chronos*. The poet Andrew Marvell captured it wonderfully in his lines: “But at my back I always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near.” For many of us, most of the time, there is no *kairos*, no quality time, only the inexorable tick, tick, tick of the clock.

It has been documented that the amount of time Americans spend working has risen steadily in recent decades, so that now we have only about 16 hours a week when we’re not either at work, attending to household chores and child care, or sleeping. This is true for both men and women, blue collar and white collar, and persons of all income levels.^[i] In contrast, there are some hunting and gathering societies in which people work only two or three hours a day.

Sometimes we feel that we are being nibbled to death by all the demands on our time, like Father Kronos’ children. Yet scripture tells us that time is the very dimension in which God is working out God’s purpose of redemption. And despite appearances to the contrary, *chronos* is filled with moments in which God is present to us. The reality of God-with-us means that *kairos* breaks through into this *chronos*-driven world in intimate, God-filled moments.

One thing we can learn from Advent is that we have the ability to cooperate with God to experience moments of redeemed time. That means finding ways of stopping our 24/7 frenzy of productivity and activity. When my son was in fifth grade, I went to his school one Friday afternoon for a conference with his teacher, a wonderful woman named Joan Rector. Ms. Rector was an observant Jew. Before we started our conference, she explained that she would have to leave by a certain time because her Sabbath was starting. She needed to get tires for her car and be home by sundown. Her Sabbath practice included no driving or cooking or even using the telephone. As she explained her need to get home by sundown, my first thought was, “What a pain! How awful not to be able to do any of that for 24 hours every week.” But as I hurried back to my own over-full life, I began to think. No, it would be *wonderful!* Imagine one night and one day every week when you don’t try to be productive or indulge in escapist pastimes. You light candles and enjoy a special meal with your family. You read and discuss scripture. Married couples make love. For one day out of every seven, you have a chance to live life as God intended.

Advent offers us the gift of that kind of redeemed time. Advent gives the lie to the pervasive sickness of our culture, the belief that time is money and we can never have enough of it. Advent calls us to recognize that we cannot be prepared to receive the eternal while we remain enslaved by incessant activity and ceaseless productivity. We can prepare for the coming of Christ through the practice of simple rituals like lighting Advent candles or spiritual disciplines like praying at the same time every day, small acts that open the door just a crack to *kairos*.

Part of the challenge of Advent is allowing ourselves not to do a lot of things we think we have to do at this time of year. I know a retired couple who decided to write letters to all the people with whom they usually exchanged gifts, explaining that instead of purchasing gifts, they would make a contribution to charity. Instead of decorating the entire house, they put simple candles in the windows. Another family I know, with children at home, made a joint decision to take the money they would have spent on gifts for themselves and instead provide gifts and dinner for an indigent family. They also decided to spend Christmas Day by going as a family to work in a soup kitchen. There is no one-size-fits all solution. The call to “be alert” invites us to consider whether the customary ways we spend our money and our time are contributing to peace in our souls and peace on earth.

This particular Advent season is special because this congregation is in the moment between “already” and “not yet” as you prepare to seek and to receive a new pastor. I hope that you will individually and within your families find meaningful ways to cultivate the stillness that allows you to perceive the presence of God. And I hope that together as a community you will cultivate the openness and awareness that will prepare the way for your new pastor.

The call to “be alert at all times” is a challenge to pay attention to what is going on in the world, to gear down instead of revving up, to live in anticipation of eternity breaking into time through the coming of Christ. Christ *is* coming, even here to our neighborhood, even to the tired, the stressed the overworked. So “be alert.” Christ has come. Christ will come again. And if you slow down and attune your awareness, perhaps you may see that Christ is here with us, even now.

[i] Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American*, Basic Books, 1991.