

*We Need a Little Advent*

A Sermon by Angie Witmer based on Mark 13:24-27  
Sunday, November 30, 2008 The First Sunday of Advent  
Plymouth UCC, Des Moines, Iowa

It is the first Sunday of Advent, so I thought we'd celebrate the occasion with a pop quiz. It's just one question, though, so don't panic. Here goes:

Advent is:

- a). the beginning of the church year
- b). four weeks that focus on the themes of hope, peace, love and joy
- c). a time to look at why we do what we do, see if it's in line with what God hopes and wants for us, and then begin again
- d). A, B & C
- e). the time we stress out and go slightly insane as we try to fit in work and family time and shopping and wrapping and baking and sending holiday greetings all under the guise of celebrating the birth of the one who came to give us life.

The answer? D. Although E is a popular choice with many of us, stressing and going crazy aren't what this season is all about.

I had 'E' in mind when I was driving around town the other day and heard this old Christmas classic come on the radio: "We need a little Christmas right this very minute, candles on the table, carols 'round the spinet..." All I could think was, "Really? I don't think so. What we could all use right now is a good, strong dose of Advent."

Lest you think I'm going to go all Scrooge-y on you here, let me assure you that I love the rituals of this season. I love getting together with friends to laugh and share stories and sing a little. I love setting aside time with Paul to put on some Christmas music and decorate the tree. I love going out with friends and family to shop for just the right gift and I love sitting down to carefully wrap each one of those gifts. Why? Not because I need more things to do. I love all of these things because I believe that this might actually be a glimpse of what God has in mind for us: working, breaking bread, laughing, singing, and celebrating life together, being present and grounded in the moment—not just during the holidays but all year long.

The problem is, we don't do these things all year long. The other eleven months of the year, we get buried under our work and our daily must-dos and are simply too tired and overwhelmed at the end of day to laugh and share stories with friends. We feel awkward gathering 'round the spinet on a regular Sunday evening, so we flip on the TV instead. And getting a gift just for the heck of it makes you wonder what the

other person wants from you in return. It's a whole lot easier to just let things go...until the holidays roll around, that is. When the holidays arrive, we somehow feel obligated to do all of the holiday things and catch up with everyone in our address book, so we try to cram a year's worth of celebration and memory making into the space of a few short weeks. Cramming that much fun into such a condensed time frame, though, is a sure recipe for disaster.

Oh, we start out the season believing that this year we'll be stress free because we're going to "do it right this time." So we make lists and keep a tight calendar...but instead of making life simpler and easier, the lists and the calendars hang over our heads, reminding us of all of the things we have yet to do as they grow longer and longer and longer, making us more and more anxious as the days go by. There are school concerts, neighborhood get-togethers, office parties and midnight sales at the mall not to mention the different configurations of family gatherings, most of which are scheduled for the same weekend. The loving, thoughtful gestures of baking and shopping and wrapping and decorating and caroling and hanging out with friends quickly turn into chores that we just want to get checked off of our to-do lists. Tempers flare and people do things that they would never dream of doing any other time of year—things like screaming and shoving and calling people truly offensive names just to save a couple of bucks on a TV or to get their hands on the

last electronic video system in the store. Of course, that particular item is the only thing that their child asked for this year, so nothing else will do because no one wants to disappoint a child at Christmas. No one wants to disappoint *anybody* at Christmas. So we keep at it.

By mid-December many of us resign ourselves to the fact that this is just how it's going to be, so we grit our teeth, put our heads down and hope that we'll survive the rest of the holidays without coming too unglued. When December 26 finally arrives, there are sighs of relief and grateful prayers aplenty that it's all over for another year. Life can now go back to normal. Happy birthday, Jesus.

We need this kind of Christmas, as my mother used to say, like we need a hole in the head.

It doesn't have to be this way, you know. Matt preached a sermon<sup>1</sup> here a couple of weeks ago that got me thinking: what if we really did do things differently this year? What if we took this Advent thing to heart? I believe Matt's actual quote was: "Life, real life, requires risk. And so most days, most of us are willing to settle for something less. We are not alive, not really; we are busy...or distracted...or numb. And so we squander the glory of God. We take this life that we have been given and

stick it in a hole in the ground. Maybe it's time to try a different approach."

Maybe it is. The real life that Matt talked about, the real life that God offers, is something that I believe all of us crave: lives that are full and whole, grounded in peace and joy. We would choose the gift of real life over anything else in the world. The problem is, we keep trying to buy that kind of life—and it simply can't be bought. It can only be lived, which means that in order to get that kind of life we have to take some risks, change our ways and break some habits.

Fortunately, Advent gives us the perfect excuse to do these very things. If we do it right, we get to take a step back and look at how we've been doing, where we've stopped living, and what has been distracting us...and then we get to start again, change our ways as we try a different approach. What a gift.

We jump into this season and this new year in the life of the church with a reading from Mark—the focus gospel for the months to come. Mark's writing is fairly no-nonsense: he calls it like he sees it—that's certainly true in today's story. Intended to be words of comfort, he opens with visions of the sun and the moon going dark and the stars falling from the sky. Mark's "scared straight" method of pastoral care doesn't exactly

evoke warm fuzzies but it is exactly the dose of reality that these folks needed to hear. They needed to be told the truth, and nothing but the truth. Those first century Christians were going through some very scary, tough, anxious times. Some of them had even left the fold to follow “false prophets” — people and things that would provide them instant gratification, some hard and fast answers, a little anesthesia from the pain of life because they just couldn’t take it anymore. They were hurting and wanted to know where God was in the midst of all the mess.

Huh. Sounds oddly familiar...

The truth that those people really needed to hear may be the same truth that we all need to hear: that if you keep doing the same thing you’ve always done hoping that things will somehow turn out different, you’re nuts. And if that truth cuts across the centuries, maybe Mark’s words of wisdom and advice to his people will ring true for us as well. He said (and I paraphrase here): “Stop. Don’t panic. Jesus lived. Jesus died. Jesus was resurrected. And he’s coming again. I wish I could tell you when—I know that would offer you some comfort right now—but I can’t. No one knows when that will happen. No one. But he is. Until that time, here’s what you need to do: keep awake.”

Look around. Pay attention. See life as God wants you to see it: full of hope and possibility, suffering and incomplete. You bet it gets scary sometimes. Uncomfortable, too. Painful even. But that's no reason to give up hope. You're not alone. God is here. Right here. And Jesus is coming. So keep awake. Be ready.

Last week, David said in his sermon<sup>2</sup> that "church matters." For some reason, that statement stuck with me—not unlike Matt's observation the previous week—and has been rattling around in my head ever since. The more I sit with this thought, the more I believe it to be true...and then some. Church doesn't just matter—when it comes to living whole lives, I believe that this place is crucial. This is one of the very few places we can get together with people who agree with us and people who disagree with us and see first hand that there is room for any and all at the table. Here is one of the very few places where, when we show up they have to take us in no matter what. It's home. It's family.<sup>3</sup> It's where we are reminded week in and week out who we are and to whom we belong. It's where we work and play and serve and grow and learn together—not alone, but together, as the body of Christ, with people of all ages and all backgrounds and all walks of life. It's where we learn how to be Advent people in a world that would shut us up and tear us down and numb us out and close us in. Yes, church matters. It matters more than we can even imagine.

Here's an idea: let's try a different approach this year. Instead of putting our faith and hope into longer lists, better budgeting and bigger calendars, let's do this Advent thing right and put church at the heart of things for the next few weeks. What have we got to lose? Anxiety? Fear? Stress? Sounds like a good trade for all that is offered in return.

During this amazing holy season, let's take seriously that what we do here and say here and pray here and sing here really does matter. Let's discover that hope, peace, love and joy are more than just cute seasonal slogans—they really are a way of life. Let's believe that God is here and that Jesus really is coming. Let's keep awake. Who knows? It might become a habit...and God knows, we could all use a habit like that.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Mardis-LeCroy's sermon "Risky Business". 11/16/2008.

[www.plymouthchurch.com/worship/sermons.phg](http://www.plymouthchurch.com/worship/sermons.phg)

<sup>2</sup> David Ruhe's sermon "Appropriate Urgency". 11/23/2008.

[www.plymouthchurch.com/worship/sermons.phg](http://www.plymouthchurch.com/worship/sermons.phg)

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Robert Frost for this image in his poem "Death of the Hired Man"