

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Advent 1 (A) ~ 30 November 2025
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Matthew 24:36-42

Let us pray:

God, seek us out, and find us,
we your tired people,
and lead us out to where hope lies
where your kingdom will come
and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, *Amen*.¹

Welcome to Advent, beloveds.

For many people, Advent is their favorite season of the Church year. It is a short period, just four weeks in this branch of Christianity – although many Orthodox Churches follow the older tradition of a longer Advent, meant to mirror the 40 days of Lent. Whether we observe it for four weeks or seven, the imagery and symbolism of Advent seem to be all about *time*:

- + We light the candles of the Advent wreath and watch them burn down, progressively over the weeks leading up to Christmas. Here in the northern hemisphere, that march of time corresponds well to the waning light and the coming solstice. This is why I like to use real wax candles in the Advent wreath, as opposed to the refillable oil ones we have at the Altar and lectern: The point is lost on us if the candles don't go down!
- + Children (and adults, too) look forward to opening the windows of their Advent calendars every day.

¹ Kate Bowler, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days* (New York: Convergent Books, 2023), 214.

- + In the secular world, we're deep into the season of frenzy, worshipping the god of busy-ness, packing our diaries with more and more activities and parties and shopping – which we can do 24/7, no matter where we are or what else we're *supposed* to be doing.

We tend to squeeze a lot of living into this narrow window of days from now until December 25.

I wonder if that's what makes Advent such an appealing season: There is a sense in which it is a *manageable* chunk of time, bounded, with term-limits, so to speak. No matter how we choose to approach these next few weeks, whether as an intentional period of spiritual deepening or the count-down to the holiday (or some of both), the result is the same: Christmas will come, Advent will be over, and we will move on to preparations for the new year.

Check. Check. Check.

Advent *feels like* time we can control. *We* light candles, *we* open little windows on the calendar, *we* cross off items on our “to do” lists. And there is something so satisfying about all of it.

This is where we must be careful, to check ourselves, because the truth is, any notion that we are in charge is an illusion – or maybe *delusion* is a better word.

We spend our lives trying to wrestle circumstances into submission, don't we? We work hard to control our health, our finances, our relationships, our kids' college prospects...you name it. And time after time we're completely baffled when things don't go exactly as intended. *How could this be?* we wonder. *I was so careful. I had it all planned out.*

Maybe that's precisely the problem.

Why are we so surprised – shocked, even offended – when the unexpected, the unthinkable, the unplanned, happens? That's a real question, not a rhetorical one. I

wonder that about myself: Why do I always fall for the fiction that I've got everything in hand?

Today's Gospel reading, on the first Sunday of this finite, bounded, countdown-to-Christmas season, turns that human need for control and certainty on its head. This morning we're not looking toward Jesus in the manger surrounded by all the lowing cattle and other Friendly Beasts. Today the very adult, about-to-be-crucified, about-to-enter-His-glory Jesus makes it clear that we're not nearly as "in control" as we think.

On this First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the period when – perhaps more than at any other season of the Church year – we seem to be most certain about time, Jesus blows our certainty right out of the water:

About that day and hour no one knows, He says.

Not you, not I, not the theologians, not the Archbishop of Canterbury, not the Pope, not the doomsday preachers warning about the rapture....

neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Did you catch that? No one. This suggests that maybe – just maybe – we don't have all the answers. And maybe that is okay...or even more than okay. Maybe that is what grace looks and feels like: the luxurious freedom *not* to know.

I wonder if that's why Jesus compares Himself to a thief, breaking in in the night: Our need for control, for predictability, for ordering and *knowing*, is like an ADT security system or a Ring camera, designed to protect us continually from threat or a breach of our perimeter. When we believe that we are in charge, or are supposed to be in charge, then everything "out there" is a potential threat. The risk of losing control becomes unthinkable, and we have to work harder and harder to patrol our boundaries.

Of course we all need some sense of agency, some notion that we can effect change and impact our future, in order to go on every day. It's human nature to want to know what is going to happen, and when. It's human nature to crave the ability to

be in charge of our destinies. I assure you that Jesus knows that. He understands what it is to be human.

But that kind of perpetual surveillance is also exhausting, and anxiety-producing. It comes from fear, from the scarcity mindset I talked about last week. It makes our lives smaller, ultimately. And that most certainly is not of God. Living our lives as though we are in control, as though we have the answers, makes it really difficult to notice the unexpected, unanticipated work of God in our midst. As the writer Jan Richardson puts it, “there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before...What is possible is to not see it, to miss it, to turn just as it brushes past you.”

We don’t see the new things God is doing because we’re so busy hanging on for dear life to keep things exactly the way we want them to be.

We don’t see the new things God is doing because we want God to do what *we* want God to do – and when we want God to do it.

It's the difference, when we pray, between “THY will be done,” and “MY will be done.”

And that’s a crying shame.

It’s a shame because Jesus is inviting us to become more agnostic.

What, now?

You heard me correctly: Jesus wants us to be agnostic.

Jesus wants us to practice the art of *not* knowing, of leaning into the possibility that we are not in charge. Jesus wants us to experience the grace and freedom of *not* having all the answers. Jesus calls us to be open to the possibility of surprise.

We can go ahead spinning on our hamster wheels all we want, trying to predict or control or guard against some unfortunate outcome. But what kind of life is that? It doesn’t sound abundant, or joy-filled at all.

So: What if Jesus is trying to break in, not to take anything away from us, but to rescue us, to liberate us, to set us free from the dark, cramped, narrow spaces we've constructed for ourselves?

How might that change things? How might that change *you*?

There is something is on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before...

Welcome to Advent, beloveds. *Amen.*