
Advent #1: Longing
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
November 27, 2022
By Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44

Happy New Year! What? You didn't know that today is the start of a new year? It's true. At least in church. Because the Christian calendar begins on the first Sunday in advent. And so, now, we are officially in year "A" of the 3 year lectionary cycle. Which means this coming year we will be hearing about the life of Jesus primarily through the lens of the gospel of Matthew - if we follow protocol anyway.

[image: christian calendar]

And so I now get to tell you that there are two reasons I do not like the Christian calendar. One simple reason, and one more complex reason. The simple reason is that I'm not a big fan of Matthew's interpretation of Jesus. I suspect that is simply because the audience that Matthew wrote too is the community that is most unlike us - compared to the audiences of Mark, Luke, and John. That is not Matthew's fault of course. But I do relate better to the vision of Jesus found in Mark and Luke. But we will survive, as we do every third year. And we will appreciate many things in Matthew along the way.

The second reason I do not like the Christian calendar is more complex, and I hope, more interesting. I'll bet that you hope it's more interesting too. The second reason I do not like the Christian calendar is because of Advent.

[image: cat creche]

Let's begin with a thought experiment. Imagine that I am standing here - right now - like I am. That's easy right? Now imagine that I announce to you that the "son of God" will be arriving soon, somewhere near here. That should be easy too. Now here is the hard part. Imagine you have never ever heard those words before. Imagine that everyone you know has never heard this before. Imagine that you are not even completely sure what I mean by the term "son of God". Oh - and you have to imagine that you believe me. Now, imagine what you would do following this service. What

would you do after this service ends if you just heard - for the very first time - that the son of God was coming soon?

[image: texting while walking]

We would search. We would talk to strangers on the street. We would follow social media hoping against hope to find this “son of God” somewhere. We would walk and text. We would be glued to any news source we could find. And we would have no idea what or who - exactly - you were looking for. Some of us might sell our homes in order to finance travel around the world so that you to go look for this “son of God” in as many places as possible as fast as possible. All of us would go well outside our comfort zones to search for this “son of God”, this coming gift in our midst. I might even be willing to use FaceBook! We would all go crazy looking for this unknown “son of God” in our midst, right? And the phrase “son of God” would come up in every single conversation we had.

[image: horsemen of the apocalypse with toilet paper]

It would be like the early days of the pandemic, when everyone was afraid of everything. We all spent hours reading new stories and following social media because we were compelled to understand this new word, “covid” and how it might impact our lives. Even the horsemen of the apocalypse were stocking up on toilet paper. Everyone went crazy.

[image: face shield]

We felt compelled to learn new things - like how to make face shields from drinks bottles. The word “covid” came up in every single conversation we had.

So why is it that I can stand at this pulpit and tell you that the “son of God” will be arriving soon, somewhere near here, and there is zero sense of excitement or anticipation? I noticed that none of you screamed “OMG” and ran out of the sanctuary. None of you are frantically glued to your phones. In 2022 news of the coming arrival of the “son of God” does not seem to create any impact at all. Even in the church.

[image: advent calendar]

See - here’s the problem. Advent, we are told, is a time when we are invited to wait for, look for, and find Jesus in our midst. On the surface, that sounds like a great

project. The problem is that - because of the Christian calendar - we all know what to expect already. We know that Jesus will be born - metaphorically - on Christmas Day. We know that the day will be on December 25. We know that Jesus will appear (metaphorically) as a baby. We know that Jesus will be born far away. I mean, really, there are simply no surprises left. Most of us likely do not feel called to go outside our comfort zones to find Jesus in our midst. Been there. Done that. Bought the t-shirt, right? The only thing we are likely waiting for is to discover when our local shops will start selling eggnog.

Advent would be much more exciting if we did not already have the whole story mapped out.

Let's try another experiment.

[image: what are you looking forward to as we head towards Christmas?]

Let me ask you - what are you looking forward to as we head towards Christmas?
[descend and ask - what are people looking forward to?]

Now all of your expectations sound wonderful, and I honestly hope that you do live out those hopes. But I do feel the need to mention that every single thing you mentioned was in many ways not what you look forward to. But rather what you look back to. Trying to recapture the joy of past activities and memories. I understand that myself. Christmas is special in a very particular way when there are young children around. And it is easy and fun to reflect back on those days warmly. It's very natural that when we celebrate Christmas, many of us enjoy memories of Christmases past.

But my question to you remains unanswered. I asked what are you looking forward to? What new experiences are you open to? How far out of your comfort zone are you willing to go? How much discomfort are you willing to live with as you search for Jesus in our midst today? How much actual anticipation are you willing to live with?

Advent without any surprises cannot really be much of an advent. The problem with Advent is that we know how it turns out. But instead of feeling a call outside our personal comfort zones, many of us will see Advent as an opportunity for nostalgia about Christmases past. There is nothing wrong with nostalgia per se. But that is a call to our past, not a call to our future.

When Covid came along - we all engaged with it, in our own ways. Now that Advent is here, Are we engaged at all?

Is it even possible for us to have any real sense of anticipation this Advent? And if you think I'm picking on you here, I am directing the question at myself too. I myself struggle to embrace anticipation during advent. Knowing what to expect is a double-edged sword because it sort of ruins the anticipation.

[image: longing art piece]

So this year, I have a strategy that will hopefully help us create some anticipation. I'm using this strategy in our Advent Groups. I'm using this strategy in worship. It's very simple: In order to find Jesus, we need to be looking for Jesus. And in order to look for Jesus - to truly look for Jesus - we have to long for something. Something that is not already in our grasp. The first step in Advent has got to be affirming that we are in fact longing for something that is beyond our grasp. We need to affirm that our lives are incomplete in some way. Otherwise, there is nothing to look for. And if we do not look for anything, we will not find anything.

[image: hopeless longing]

Now I hope that idea is not too depressing for you. And in truth, it's not my original idea anyway. In Isaiah earlier we read, "Let us walk in the light of the Lord!". But there cannot be a call to walk in the light if there is no darkness. There is no point trying to find the light unless we also understand and embrace the darkness in our lives.

[image: longing art piece]

What does your heart truly long for? What inner darkness exists for you that is waiting, hoping, for the chance to walk in the light? If you can answer that question you just might find a great sense of anticipation this Advent. Deep inner longings are not bad. Deep inner longings are how we find new life. Our discomfort with our deep inner longings propels us into finding new life.

[image: black friday]

But what does it mean to long for something? In our society we generally do not long for things. We just go get them! Or if we cannot get them for some reason, we rationalize that we do not need them, or we do not deserve them. Perhaps some of us

have completely lost our ability to long. Sometimes we don't have feelings of longing because we have given up all hope of being satisfied, and so we stop longing. Sometimes we do not have feelings of longing because we have given up all hope, period.. Sometimes we give up hope because our hopes have been dashed too many times.

But that is complete poppycock! Yes, strong language. That is poppycock!
[image: mel robbins quote below]

As Mel Robbins tells us, "Failure does not make us give up. Failure happens when we give up". Advent is the season of hope, and embracing your own deep longings is a way to find that hope again.

Think of your own life. What dream have you given up on. What dream have you decided you can live without. What dream have you decided you do not deserve. Perhaps this Advent ... 2022 ... you will be brave enough to reconsider your dreams. Your dream matters for the simple reason that you matter.

If you have no idea what I'm talking about. Or if you have not idea where to look for this buried dream ... well, talk to me of course. But beyond that, simply consider where you spend too much of your time. Are you frequently angry? That is a huge clue that your life is incomplete and you do actually long for something. Are you lonely? Are you bored? Are you scared? These are all threads that we can follow that will lead us to understand our own deepest longings.

[image: sadhguru]

According to the spiritual mystic Jaggi Vasudev, better known as Sadhguru, it is difficult for humans to feel a deep sense of longing because we snack (metaphorically) too much. We do things that either distract us or perhaps titillate us. We shop, or knit, or watch YouTube, or work too hard or whatever it is that distracts us from our own longing. Longing is a type of hunger. And with hunger for food, if you snack all the time, you never experience hunger. Similarly, if we have filled our lives with distractions, we will never understand our own deepest longings.

[image: sitting in a white room]

Sadhguru's cure for this is something we won't like at all. He suggests that we go home, paint one room entirely white, put a comfortable chair in there, and simply sit in

the room - eyes open - for a few days, or perhaps a week. No reading. No writing. No TV. No talking. No thinking. Sadhguru suggests that distancing ourselves from all distractions allows us to find out what it is that we truly long for. I have to confess that sounds a bit extreme. But I would expect that the method works very well.

I am not going to do that myself. I'm not sure that I actually want to come face to face with my deepest longings. And yet, the words from Matthew remind us, "But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

[image: longing art piece]

If we do not want to face our deepest longings today, then when? Tomorrow? Tomorrow may be too late. Besides, why would we want to put off a journey that will lead us to fullness of life. Advent does not last forever you know.

I believe that embracing our own deepest longings is a spiritual practice And it is only by embracing our longings that we can look deeply for Jesus in our midst.

Let me close with this idea.

Christmas is coming, and for most of us, that brings to mind wonderful memories of friends and families, trees, gifts, presents, laughter, joy. If you share in those memories, I would invite you to consider that part of the gift of all that was being part of a family, or a group of friends that celebrated Christmas together. You felt that you belonged. Perhaps the biggest gift of Christmas is the feeling we get when we know that we belong.

[image: invitation to belonging]

[image: invitation to be-longing]

[image: invitation to be longing]

Belonging is wonderful. It is a gift. But it is also an invitation. The invitation is to be-longing. To be longing. To belong in such a safe space that you are free to experience your deepest longings. No need for you to pretend that you are OK when you are not. No need for you to pretend that you do not want the things you actually do want. No need for

you to give up on your future or your dreams. You just a need to embrace your longings.

[image: longing art piece]

Next week we will delve into seeking Jesus in our midst. You have 1 week to consider your own deepest longings before we move on to that second step. If you are struggling to understand this, I encourage you to reach out to me. Or participate in one of our Advent Groups, when we will have more time to discuss this and share our own stories.

If you do not long for anything, how on earth can you hope to find Jesus in your midst? And more to the point ... why would you even bother? This Advent, you are invited to embrace your deepest longings as the first step in finding Jesus in our midst. Finding your own deepest longings is not a pointless exercise for the simple reason that you are worth it.

So hang on tight. Advent 2022 just might be worth anticipating after all!

Amen.