

Study Guide Sunday December 3, 2017

Theme: Active Waiting **Readings:** Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7; 17-19; Mark 13:24-37

This week marks the first Sunday of Advent, a time commonly observed in many Christian Churches as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas. The word “advent” is derived from a version of the Latin word meaning “coming.” And more often than not, the readings and teachings during this time often focus on our waiting and preparation for the Second Coming of Christ. After all, Jesus has already come. You’ll notice these apocalyptic text in this weeks readings from Isaiah and Mark, as the authors play with elements of dualism (good v. evil); pessimism (times are tough and going to get tougher); and imminence (so tough the world as we know it is about to end!) Egads! “Beware. Keep wake!” Jesus commands.

Advent also marks the beginning of a new church year. (Most churches follow the lectionary calendar which sets up scripture readings for three years; Year A, B, and C). This week we are entering Year B. The way I see it, or read into this apocalyptic genre, the first Sunday of Advent is both a time of welcoming as well as a time of waiting for God’s promise to be fulfilled. Therefore, how we welcome and how we wait are equally as important as who we welcome and what we are waiting for; Christmas and the Christ.

This week I will argue that we can bide our time waiting passively, believing that Christmas is just around the corner. Or we can wait actively, knowing that Christ has already come. The first requires nothing more than simply showing up and sitting around while God does all the work. The other, and the one that I would argue Jesus is calling us to do, involves being always present, awake and in the moment, and doing the will of God. It might not seem so obvious, but I believe the second way is what Jesus is calling us to do as he warns us be prepared (and to prepare the world) for his return.

By “keeping alert” and “staying awake,” which is to say by living our lives in accord with Christ, not only will we be prepared to live in the promised realm of God when it comes, but we may experience some of what life in that realm will be like now. And so it is of no surprise this is where the church year begins. How you begin your time is up to you.

Read: Isaiah 64:1-9

Q: What are all the things in life that you are waiting for?

This question should have more layers than an onion. I invite you to write down as many as you can throughout the week, from the ridiculous to the everyday to the spiritual, and think about how God is (or is not) addressing the yearnings of your heart.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, be with me in every facet of my life. And bless me as I wait for you to make yourself know in this world again; through the heavens, and through me. Amen.

Read: Mark 13:24-27; Daniel 7:13-14; Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

It's not unusual for biblical prophets to use cosmic imagery to describe what was often indescribable to them. Mark draws on their imagery to connect Jesus to their prophecies. "What sounds like a disaster, actually prepares us for the 'Son of Man' and his gathering of the 'elect.' Advent eventually takes us to a babe in a manger, but it begins by traversing the cosmos." There is something to be said about waiting for the beginning of the Christian story by looking at the ending.

Q: How do you envision the end times? (hint: is it a blessing or a curse?)

To get the most out of your answer, think about this question from a personal standpoint, a religious standpoint, and a global (or cosmic) point of view. Think about God's promise (and your relationship, our relationship, and the universes relationship in it) and how God's faithfulness comes into play. This is tough so have fun, be creative, and be open to other's interpretations.

Q: How can you help your community prepare for the coming of the Christ child?

Read: Ezekiel 34:11-16; 20-24; Psalm 23

Q: What promises of God do you find most comforting in these passages?

Read: Mark 13:32-37; Matthew 25:31-46; 1 John 2:28-29

Q: How are you spending your time as you prepare your heart to meet Jesus?

Three times in Mark's passage, Jesus warns us to stay awake and to be alert for the coming day of judgment. And in Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives a clear picture on how God's sheep will be judged. This suggests to me that as we await his arrival, with both anticipation and expectation, we do so with hearts pointed to Christ, who has taught us to live each day as if it's Christmas! Christ is here, right now, looking to see how and who we love in his name.

Q: How might living every day in the joy of Christmas keep you active in Christ's love?

Slow Read and Meditation: **Psalm 80:1-7**

As always, read more than once; slowly focus on your breathing and any words or phrases that might be speaking to you. Stay in this place as you pray to God for peace, strength, and patience as you wait for Christ to come again.

Prayer: "Restore me, O Lord God of Host; let your face shine, that I might be saved." Amen.