

Advent 1
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Imagine a world in which Christmas didn't come on December 25th, but with the first snowfall of the year. If that were the case, you couldn't count on a certain number of shopping days before Christmas, you would have to do your shopping early, have presents wrapped and ready by the first cold snap of the season. The procrastinators would not be racing through the department stores on December 24th, but they'd be hurrying about whenever the North wind blew and gray clouds hung in the sky. In some parts of the world, that day would be earlier than others. "Christmas could come today!" signs would say in store windows. And advertisers would announce, "Don't let it catch you unprepared!"

For children, of course, it would be different; each blustery day would be filled with possibility. From the middle of October on, they would leap from their beds in the morning and rush to the window, hoping to see the ground blanketed in white. At the breakfast table they would ask their parents: "Do you think it might come today? Do you think it will be tomorrow? The most popular show on television would be the evening news with the weather report or perhaps the weather channel. Children would huddle around to watch hoping that on this night, the weatherman would put on his Santa Claus hat and predict snow. "What's that?" he would ask. "Do I hear jingle bells? Yes, boys and girls, they had Christmas in Denver Colorado yesterday, and it looks like it's coming our way!" No child would sleep well on a night like that, getting up several times to look out the window and see if flakes of snow were gently falling from the sky. And what a disappointment to find, at the first light of dawn, the same brown grass on the ground that had been there the day before.

Ah, but what joy when it did come! The little girl cutting out a snowman out of white construction paper would look out the window of her first grade classroom and see that the first flake of snow drift down out of the sky. "Christmas is HERE!" she would scream, and others would leap up from their places and rush to the window to see for themselves. "It is! It is!" they would shout. "Look! There goes another flake and another, and another." Little girls would grab each other by the hands and twirl around the room, their pigtails flying. Little boys would start counting off on their fingers for their friends the toys they would get that day. Teachers would sigh with relief, and then join the pandemonium, as grateful as their students that it had finally come. "May I have your attention, please?" the principal would announce over the loudspeaker, in a big jolly voice. "It looks like Christmas is here!" And the official announcement would bring on a second round of jubilation, so that his instructions about the departure of school buses could hardly be heard over the roar.

It would be strange living in a world like that, wouldn't it? It would be so much different from the scheduled way we celebrate Christmas now. But it would be much more like that unscheduled first Christmas, and almost exactly like the unscheduled second

coming of Christ. Jesus says, "But about that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Anyone who has waited for a baby to come can tell you that they don't always come on schedule. You can't really put that trip to the hospital on your calendar. You just do all you can to be ready and then wait for labor to begin. It must have been that way for Joseph and Mary. It was certainly that way with Maria and me, when Maria was expecting. I remember many visits to the hospital, thinking this will be the day, and then waiting and walking the halls to facilitate the process, but then finally being sent home in disappointment. I knew the baby would come, but I just didn't know when. Living in a state of constant readiness is difficult. Learning that, in the Season of Advent seems oddly appropriate, but not especially comforting. Is this how we're supposed to wait for the second coming of Christ? Living in anticipation but sort of unsettled as well? Well, probably so. Even so, Come Lord Jesus. And as we awaited our new baby, we'd say come little Julia. We have been waiting for you for so long. It will be such a joy to hold you in our arms and fall in love with you. Could it be today?

Well, eventually our daughter Julia did come. But try as you might to be ready, the birth of a child can sneak up on you, like the first snow of winter, like a thief in the night. The coming of Christ caught his mother Mary in a strange town, miles away from the comforts of home and the help of her local midwife. "Not now," she groaned when the first pain came. "Not here." She must have known that it would come soon, but if she had known exactly when the child would come, don't you think she might have been better prepared, and not caught giving birth in a barn? But the Second coming of Christ is even less predictable than that, so Jesus says, we must be ready all the time.

But we are to be ready with our hearts full of hope, like children waiting for Christmas to come, like a woman expecting a child. For so long the idea of the Second Coming has been wrapped in such frightening images that we have stopped talking about it. "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man," Jesus warns us in our Gospel reading. "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man." Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 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 must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

It's a little frightening, isn't it? All that talk about floods, catching people unaware, and others being snatched away, and thieves breaking into the house? Earlier in this same chapter Jesus talks about the sun being darkened, and the moon not giving its light, and the stars falling from the sky. He talks about great suffering, such as has never been from the beginning of the world until now, and never will be again.

He talks about fleeing to the mountains, and he pities those who are pregnant or nursing infants in those days. "Pray that it might not happen in winter," he says. All of which only make you want to skip chapter 24 altogether and turn back to those couple of chapters where you can read about the birth of a baby whose name was called Immanuel, "God with us". That would be better, wouldn't it? Certainly more comforting.

But the world in which we now live will not be corrected by such a silent night as that first one. At the deepest level of our need we long for the coming of someone who will have the power to do what needs to be done: to make the wrong right, the crooked straight, the rough places plain. We look for one like the prophet Amos described, who will let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The early Christians, who suffered persecution at the hands of the world, and who were powerless to stop it, prayed for the Second Coming of Christ. They had heard of his return from his disciples and they waited for it with pounding hearts, watching the skies like children longing for the first snowfall of winter. "Maranatha!" they prayed. "Come, Lord Jesus!" Because they believed with all their hearts that the one who would come again would be the same one who had come before.

I believe that. And I believe that if we haven't yet earnestly prayed for the Second Coming of Christ then we haven't understood how much our world is in need of deliverance. Now I could go on and on about the troubles in the world, the injustices, the poverty, the wars, the problems in our own neighborhoods, and if we put our emphasis there, we will certainly begin to see and feel the need for deliverance, and begin to long for it and pray for it.

But I believe our focus should be on the answer to our prayers rather than the problems themselves. And surely if anyone could set the world right it would be Jesus Christ. So with that in mind we might want to ask ourselves the question: if Jesus were to come again, just because we need him, just because we've waited so long, would we be ready? Would we have God so much in our life that we would know Him, that we would anticipate Him, that we would look forward to receive him?Because if there's any truth to this text – and I think there is – his coming will be like Christmas in that other context I described earlier, not on any given date, but simply when the time is right. And when that time comes we wouldn't want to be caught sleeping. We would want to be wide awake, looking out our bedroom windows, ready to shout at the first sign of a snowflake, "IT'S HERE!"

So, as you shop for presents in the weeks ahead, as you trim the tree and string the lights, as you stock the pantry and send out cards, as you get ready in all those ways for the annual celebration that will come December 25th, don't forget to get ready for that other celebration...that will come.....like the first flake of snow. Amen.