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Advent Imposter Syndrome  
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Mark 13:24-37  
Advent 1

*"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I'd like to tell you a story of something that happened when I was working at a Madison Avenue Church in New York City. I was a seminary student and doing my training to be a minister. The church sanctuary had a wraparound loft for overflow seating, but it was almost never used. One day, I saw a man sitting up there during the service. At this church they served communion every single week and every week the congregation came forward to receive the elements from the ministers standing up front. When it was time for communion, the man sitting in the loft, instead of coming forward snuck out the back door. The same thing happened the next week. He would arrive a little late and head upstairs to be alone. When communion came, he left. I asked the Senior Pastor about it, and he told me who the man was. He was a fellow Presbyterian minister from across town who had a very public fall from grace. It was in the New York Times, and I had read about it, and I knew who he was, but I just didn't recognize him. He didn't look like a big, charismatic preacher personality but a sad and broken human being.

Once I knew who he was then seeing him come into church in this secretive and non-participatory way was heartbreaking. He must have officiated communion hundreds, if not thousands, of times during his career, inviting sinners to come forward and receive the gifts of God. Yet here he was, now unable to come forward and receive those same graces – feeling completely unworthy of the cup and the bread. The Senior Pastor, my boss, had met with this man to talk about what he was going through. He suggested that if it was too much for him to walk down in front of the church then someone could bring the elements up to him, but he said he just wasn't ready. He felt like he had made such a mess of things that he did not deserve the sacrament.

I wonder how often this happens that we feel unworthy of receiving what God has to offer us. I especially wonder about this in the time of year when we are supposed to be doing deep, internal,

and spiritual work to ready ourselves for the coming of Christ that we more often just feel empty and depleted and exhausted and broken. When the preachers tell us to ‘get ready’ and ‘keep awake’ and ‘prepare our hearts’ we just sigh knowing that our lives are a little too messy for that kind of stuff. We sit in church feeling like everyone else probably has it all figured out, they have prepared properly for the season, but we just aren’t ready or even worthy.

We are here, we showed up but that is about all we have to show for ourselves. Sitting in a church feeling spiritually inadequate. I’m calling it Advent Imposter Syndrome. The bad news is that the scripture passages the first two weeks in Advent won’t help anyone who is feeling inadequate. Mark’s apocalyptic language in the passage today makes it seem like if we are not perfectly prepared then Christ is going to come and find you asleep on the job and the shame will be real! Next week, John the Baptist will come and shout at us and tell us that we are doomed if we haven’t done all of the right things and properly repented and cleansed our hearts before Jesus arrives. Both passages are quite heavy and further the sense of being ill-equipped, unprepared, and unworthy of all of it.

But that is kind of the point of Jesus in the first place. God’s gift to humanity was something no one was worthy of receiving. God comes into a world that is not at all ready to meet him. God comes to us in Jesus because we can’t get ourselves ready enough or prepared enough or clean enough. So, we need to stop feeling inadequate about where we are in life – and try to accept that wherever we are, the gifts of God are indeed for us. The gifts of God for the people of God!

The gifts of this season can just be simple things like a small piece of bread that reminds us of God’s love for the world. Or a beloved carol reminding us that God breaks into the darkness. Or a connection with friends or family that we haven’t heard from since last Christmas reminding us of the rich history of our lives. It is not the easiest time of year for a variety of reasons but the message from God to you at Christmas is pretty profound. The message is, “I’ll come to you.” God says, “I’ll come to you.” God comes to us with a message of acceptance and love. You are loved. You are forgiven. You are blessed.

The message of Christmas can feel difficult to hear because we are so accustomed to have to do things, earn things, get things for ourselves. At Christmas God comes to us – even to those who feel broken by the year we have had, even to those who feel hardened by the choices we have made, even to those who have doubt about their faith or no faith at all. The message of Christmas is love. Love from God to you in the person of Jesus. Advent doesn’t need to feel like a spiritually intimidating time – if we know the message of Christmas is love then Advent is just our chance to take some time to appreciate the profound gifts of grace offered to us from our Creator.

There was a time, not too many years ago, when the garbage truck coming down the street was a really big deal. My son was little, and the garbage men were heroes and the garbage truck coming down the street was a sight not to be missed. On Tuesday mornings, we would hear it coming and rush to the window to watch and wave. Eventually the novelty wore off. If we saw it that was nice, but we wouldn’t stop what we were doing to stand at attention for its passing. Now the sound nor the sight of a garbage truck gets any reaction at all. Like people who have grown immune to the sounds of the garbage truck for some of Advent is an annual visitor that comes but is just a

noise that we no longer recognize as something noteworthy or exciting. Advent becomes something to get through instead of something created for us as a holy blessing.

Maybe the best way for us to start Advent is partaking in the sacrament. Because at the Lord's Table none of us prepared properly, none of us brought something from home to share, not one of us can act like the host or the hostess – all of this belongs to Jesus. Jesus is the host; it is his table. In Advent, let us remember that God comes to us, not because we are worthy but because we are loved. In this sacramental meal, be reminded of the abundant blessings of life. Be reminded that God loves you. This meal is for you whether you are ready or not. And all you have to do is sit there and receive it. And for all of us, that is a very good thing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.