

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
1 Advent A 2016

Andie and I have been watching a television show lately called "This is Us." Have you all seen it? It's a family drama about a husband and wife, and their three children. But it's one of those shows that skips forward and backward in time, so in one scene it's the 70s and the kids are little, and the next scene it's today and they're grown up. Normally I don't like shows like that because I get lost and don't know what year it is, but I like this show because it traces how things that happened in the past have such an impact on the present. It's like a study in family systems, and it's also a meditation on time. It shows time compressed into moments – the ultimate measure of our lives.

Today marks the beginning of Advent, the first season in our church year. And the thing about Advent, the thing that makes it at once beautiful and challenging is that it's fundamentally about time. In the weeks ahead, we go back to the beginning and retell the story of Jesus' birth. But we also look forward to the end and the second coming of Jesus, as we see in today's gospel. So there we go again, flashing

forward and backward in time. This morning, Jesus is 30-something. Next week, he'll be in the womb.

It sounds confusing, but the point is to give us the full picture. Today's gospel places the coming birth stories in their cosmic context. This baby will be Emmanuel – the very substance of God's own life breaking into the world. The whole long story of creation and salvation will be compressed into swaddling clothes and a stable in Bethlehem.

On one hand, that's a beautiful image. But it's also challenging, because we live in the middle. Jesus has already come – that story is 2,000 years old. But he hasn't yet come again. We live in the in-between time, and Jesus has a message for us today. "Keep awake," he says, "for you do not know what day your Lord is coming. Be ready, and stay awake."

The problem with that is that waiting is stressful. Waiting in traffic, waiting in lines, waiting to open presents, waiting for a call back, waiting in the doctor's office. Waiting to live, waiting to die – it is hard to wait. And Jesus says we shouldn't just wait passively; we should be

ready. We should keep awake, be alert, for we do not know the hour.

Well, that's even harder. A constant state of readiness sounds exhausting, especially this time of year when we have so much on our minds already.

Henri Nouwen has a helpful word on this. He says that we often confuse waiting with wishing. Often when we wait, we are longing for a specific outcome. We are wishing, really, for a pre-determined result, and when it doesn't come we are distraught. We feel out of control.

But waiting, Nouwen says, is about trusting that something will be fulfilled in God's way and in God's time. It's not about a certain outcome but about giving up our need for control, and trusting God to reveal "something new and holy."

Easier said than done, I know; but if you think about it that way, waiting isn't so much about what's happening "out there" in our lives. It's really about what's happening here. It's not about checklists and deadlines. It's more of an internal readiness. It's a habit of the heart. It's about learning to wait in mystery and hope.

A friend of mine is a monk in Boston and when he talks about prayer he doesn't describe it as words we say, or things we do. He says prayer is like a set of invisible antennae coming up from our heads. All day long we send messages back and forth with God, whether we know it or not. But what if we did know it? What if we felt it, just a little bit, each day?

I kind of think that's what Advent is about. It's about paying attention, listening for those incoming messages, and remembering that they have always been there. God so longs to be in relationship with us and to capture our hearts and minds that 2,000 years ago God became flesh and dwelt among us. That's the story we will hear in the weeks ahead. It's the most amazing, world-changing story we will ever hear, and the remarkable thing is that it's still unfolding. It's happening right now. So keep awake. Be ready. You won't want to miss what happens next. Amen.