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Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

## “The Start and the End”

Scripture Text: Matthew 24:36-44

Dear people of God, here we are at the start of Advent, the season of preparation for the birth of Christ. Some of you might wonder, “Why do we need a time of preparation for celebrating Christ’s birth? This event happened over 2000 years ago. How can we prepare for something that has already taken place?” That’s a good question. But we must understand that although Advent is a time of preparation for Christ’s coming as a baby into the world, it’s also a time of preparation for his coming again, this time in glory to transform the world. The beginning of his coming into the world is related to the end of his coming again into the world. We cannot understand the beginning without the end. In fact, the Christian poet, T. S. Eliot, in his Nobel prize-winning poem, “The Four Quartets,” stated, “The end is where we start from.”

That’s how we should understand Advent. The First Sunday of Advent is associated with hope, hope in Christ’s Second Coming, his Second Advent. Unlike our secular calendar, the Christian calendar begins

today with the First Sunday of Advent. The Christian calendar begins with hope. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be a people of hope. We are to demonstrate hope to all we meet every day of our lives. The season of Advent especially reminds us of that calling to be people of hope.

We don't hope for just anything on this day. We hope for big things. We hope for transformative things. We hope for the end times to descend upon us, not that the world should be destroyed, as some misguided Christians think, but rather, that the world may be renewed and God's kingdom come in its fullness among us. We don't hope this day that we receive an 82" TV set for Christmas, nothing as trivial as that. What we hope for today is for God to come to us anew in majestic splendor to complete his first coming as a baby born to humble parents in a dirty stable. We hope today on this First Sunday of Advent that God will bring a new creation, a new heaven, a new earth, a new you and me.

Many are confused how to imagine this new life promised to Christians. We're not sure exactly what we're supposed to be hoping for or how to talk about it. Do you remember when Huckleberry Finn heard Miss Watson, that strict, obnoxious old woman, tell him about heaven? "She went on and on," Huck says, "and told me all about the good place.

She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it."

Is that our problem also? Do we not think much of heaven because we don't know what to make of it? Do we not think much of heaven because we find it boring? Do we not think much of the end times because we find them scary? Do we not think much of God's transforming work in the future because we've been misled into thinking that it will involve much violence, upheaval, and divine anger at us and the world?

It's certainly hard to imagine the end toward which the current events in this old world are pointing. Many Christians look forward with joy to the rapture not because they believe it will be such a wonderful event, but rather, out of relief that they won't have to go through the Great Tribulation on earth. They look forward to it as an escape from bad things rather than as an entrance into a world of good things. They look forward to it as a way of leaving this godforsaken world of cares and trouble for a world of no responsibility and no suffering.

In our Confirmation Class right now, we're talking about how God made Adam and Eve to work in the Garden of Eden. Work is not a result of our sinfulness. Work is not a result of our fallenness. Work is not a bad thing. God intended for humans to work to find fulfillment in life. I feel

sorry for those who don't work. They can't possibly find any meaning or purpose in life. Now by work, I don't necessarily mean paid work. Some of the most fulfilling work that we do consists of work we do out of love or as volunteer service, such as being homemakers, taking care of children, babysitting grandchildren, volunteering for the church, or enlisting in some social cause. If you can't find any work to do in your life each day, you must truly be a miserable person.

Doing things in our life here and now is important. Not only for ourselves, but for the future of the world. The end is where we start from. Do you realize that the little things you do in your life each day contribute to the consummation of God's kingdom at the end of time? We don't often, if ever, look at it that way, do we? The fullness of God's kingdom will not arrive by itself. This is where the conservative evangelicals are mistaken. They await the rapture, which takes them out of the world. We should rather be awaiting an outpouring of God's Spirit to energize us for work here and now in this world. The conservative evangelicals are busy merely reading headlines and trying to figure out how this event is a fulfillment of scripture and that occurrence is a fulfillment of scripture. They're merely being bystanders in the unfolding of history. That's not what God wants. God wants us to be participants in

what happens to the world. God wants the followers of Jesus Christ to be the main actors in what transpires in this world.

That's what Advent is all about. That's what Advent is supposed to remind us of. We're supposed to be fully immersed in the world so that we can be God's workers who help to bring about the glorious kingdom that awaits us. We don't build God's kingdom, but God won't build it without us. We hope for God's kingdom to come, not in the sense that we just wait around for it magically to appear. No, we hope for it by working for it. If we hope to become a nurse, do we just wait around for it to happen? No, we graduate from high school and then work hard in college for five years and get a nursing degree that qualifies us to be a registered nurse. If we hope to play the piano, do we just wait around for it to happen? No, we practice every day, sometimes two, three, four hours, improving each week, month, and year until we become proficient in playing the piano. The hope of Advent should not make us passive, just waiting around for the arrival of God's kingdom, or heaven, or whatever we want to call the final state of our own individual lives and the world to happen.

The end should inspire the beginning. What we are promised by Christ when he comes again in glory should energize us now to do the

works that will help to bring that end about. We should never just throw up our hands and say, “This world is hopeless.” We must have the courage to say, “Because God is in charge of this world, we can work in hope knowing that God’s intentions for the end will come about.” When Christ talks about those who were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, he wasn’t criticizing them. He was rather explaining that as we are going about our business doing the things that humans routinely do, we should be aware that we should be expectant that all of that activity we’re doing now has an ultimate goal or purpose or aim. It all looks forward in hope to the completion of God’s kingdom when all the good work that we do will be blessed and transformed into the fabric of the new heavens and new earth that awaits us. Our hope is not that we should be taken out of the world, but rather, that we find blessing in this world, in our work, in our activity. Each of us can find that blessing when we do those things in hope, in hope that they will contribute to bringing about the end that God has in store for us.

Do you dread each morning that you awake? Do you say, “Oh no, another day!” Do you wake up and remember that you must take your medication, and that you have a doctor’s appointment, and you have to go to the supermarket, and you have to go to the mall to start your

Christmas shopping, and go through the hundred things you're supposed to do today and feel like pulling the covers over you and just going back to sleep and forgetting about everything? Do you find yourself wondering, "Is this all there is in life?" We don't know what each day will bring to us. We don't know what the future holds. But we know who holds the future.

The First Sunday of Advent is about looking forward to the future in confidence. We don't know when the world will end. We don't know our last day on earth. But Advent is a time to remind us that we are a people of hope. We are a people whose destiny is not that boring future of Miss Watson. Neither is it that scary future of the dispensationalists and their talk of the rapture and the Great Tribulation and all those plagues and wars. The hope to which we look forward inspires confidence to deal with our present, whatever it might be. It's a hope that gives us peace when we're in the waiting room about to be given our test results. It's a hope that reassures us when we receive the phone call at 2:00am that our loved one has been in a car accident. It's a hope that comforts us when we get the news that our employment has been terminated. It's a hope that's deeper than any dark night that we experience, stronger than any dread, and more lovely than any vision of playing a harp and singing for all eternity.

Advent is a time to remember that God is coming to us. God is coming to us again in Jesus as God came to us in Jesus 2000 years ago. God is coming to us and for us. God is coming to us from the end as God came to us from the start. God comes to us, drawing us into the future as we are rooted in God's coming to us from the past in that little baby lying in the manger.

Let's start from the end that we may be spurred on by that glimpse of the goal, that truly glorious future that awaits us. Let's not be like Huckleberry Finn who doesn't think much of it at all, but let us rather be among those who say, "Come, Lord Jesus." Amen.