

STANDING IN RIGHT FIELD, WAITING

Remember last Advent?

In the midst of a pandemic?

I do. We were having worship services on Zoom at the time, and I was at a loss as to what to do for the first Sunday of Advent.

Fortunately, Allison Curry came to the rescue. She made a wonderful Advent wreath, complete with candles; So, on the first Sunday of Advent, as maybe fifteen or twenty people watched from their computer screens, cellphones, iPads or Kindle tablets, I lit the first candle.

The candle of Hope, just like the one we lit this morning.

I sometimes think the candle we should be lighting on the first Sunday of Advent is the candle of patience.

Patience because we're waiting for something—or rather, we're waiting for someone—to arrive. And it's not easy to wait.

During the Advent season it's quite common to put the cart before the horse—or should I say, to put the baby before the baby carriage.

In my years as a parish minister I've celebrated thirty three Advent seasons, and I don't think there's been one of them when I wasn't asked, at least once, "Why aren't we playing Christmas music?"

My standard response is that it's not Christmas, it's Advent.

To which the questioner says back to me words to the effect of, "So? I don't care. I love Christmas music. I want to hear Christmas music now."

Mary has just found out she's pregnant with the Messiah, and we want to immediately rush her and Joseph to Bethlehem so she can satisfy our impatience and give birth to the Messiah.

Come on Mary, out with him.

To which Mary might reply, "Sorry, I can't. It's not time yet. You'll just have to wait. And watch."

Well, Advent is now here, and the big countdown to Christmas has begun.

I remember when I was a kid, beginning the Friday after Thanksgiving, the Portland Press Herald always ran a small box on the bottom of the front page that reminded all of us loyal shoppers how many shopping days we had left until Christmas arrived.

Every day after school I would run to get the paper so I could read the comics, and always, always, always check that box on the front page.

I guess you could say it was a secular version of an Advent calendar. Fourteen days until Christmas.

Thirteen.

Twelve.

Eleven.

And so it went.

Sometimes I thought Christmas would never come. I guess I was too young to understand the concept of “a watched pot never boils.” So I watched, and I waited, and the longer I waited the further away Christmas seemed.

Watching and waiting is easier said than done.

Joel Aurand, a minister in The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, shared a story about how difficult it was for him to wait. He wrote . . .

“I first learned that [I wasn’t good at waiting] playing Little League baseball. I played on the Madison Township team. I wasn’t much of a ball player, but the coach was a benevolent fellow who believed that everyone on the team should get a chance to play, so occasionally I was sent to right field . . . to stand.

“I remember one game in particular, sometime during the summer that I turned ten. It was a hot, humid evening in July and my team was playing one of the teams from in town.

“We were ahead, and it was the seventh inning, and I had spent the evening warming an already hot bench. I hadn’t played yet, but I was ready, and knowing we were ahead only whetted my appetite. Finally the coach looked down the long bench at me and said, “Joel, you go on out and play right field this inning.

“It’s been said about baseball that it’s a game that manages to pack 15 minutes of fast and furious action into two-and-a-half hours. The thing about playing right field, especially in Little League, is that very rarely does that 15 minutes of action happen anywhere near you.

“The coach knew that, and that’s why I always played right field. It was the one position where I could do very little damage. Which was okay with me. I knew that I was no star athlete, and I really didn’t care if I was in right field. In fact, I wasn’t sure what I would do if the ball came out my way.

“So there I stood in right field, glad to be there, but expecting little to happen. As I’ve already said, the evening was hot, and to add to the misery the bugs were bad, the sun was bright and the game was dull. There I stood, knowing no action would come my way, and as youngsters are prone to do, my mind began to wander.

“I had learned the multiplication tables earlier that year, and I began going over them in my mind. $3 \times 4 = 12$, $4 \times 4 = 16$, and soon I was scratching the times tables in the dirt with the heel of my sneaker. But I had a tough time seeing, because the west-setting sun was squarely in my eyes and I didn’t have a hat.

“Nothing was coming my way anyway, so I took off my baseball glove and put it on my head to help block out the glare.

“Suddenly there was a shout, and out of the corner of my eye I saw a ground ball speed by me, erasing the $3 \times 4 = 12$ I had etched in the dirt. I remember looking up and seeing every one of my teammates on the bench looking at me with my baseball glove on my head. I turned and chased the ball, but it was too late.

“I had been waiting, but I hadn’t been watching. Having become preoccupied with the mechanics of waiting, I had missed my big chance; and all I could do was chase the baseball into the cow pasture as the batter ran the bases.”

“Beware,” Jesus said. “Watch! Keep alert . . . or you might miss the coming of the Lord.” But keeping alert, patiently waiting, is a difficult thing to do these days. Because we live in an instant gratification society, and I think all of us, to some degree, have fallen into the mindset of, “I want it, and I want it now!”

When I go to the Wendy's or McDonald's drive through for lunch, I try to get there before noon to "beat the rush." When I arrive, if there are more than five or six cars ahead of me I get very annoyed. And God have mercy on the driver of the car in front of me if the line moves forward and he or she is too busy looking at their cell phone to notice and move forward as well.

No one knows when the day or hour of the Lord's return will come, said Jesus. Not the angels in heaven, not even Jesus himself, knows the time. Only God does. But even though we don't know when it will occur, Jesus warned us that the time will come, so we're to "be on guard! Be alert!"

Those words remind me of a childhood prayer. "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

That last sentence, the part about dying before I woke up, frightened me as a kid. Actually, to be honest, it still scares me a little. But even as a child I understood the underlying meaning of those words: "Be ready. Be on guard. Watch. Be alert." Because no one knows what tomorrow—or even this very day—will bring.

Our lives can change, suddenly and unexpectedly, in an instant. It can turn on a dime.

One minute you're here, and the next minute you're gone.

And one minute Jesus is gone, and the next minute he's here.

So, are you waiting? Are you watching?

Not for Christmas Day to come, but for the Lord to come?

Are you prepared for the Messiah to break into your life at any time, any moment? Or are you standing out in right field with your baseball glove on your head, preoccupied with other, less important things?

The season of Advent is the beginning of a new church year for the Christian church, and for our Community of Faith. And this new beginning is an appropriate time for reflection; a good time for self-examination; a good time to pause and ask ourselves if we are ready, if we are waiting attentively for the Savior's coming.

So, let's do as Jesus said and "Be on guard! Be alert! Watch!"

Because whenever Christ comes, we don't want him to find us standing in right field, waiting with our baseball glove on our heads, totally oblivious to the signs of his coming. Thanks be to God. Amen.