

Happy New Year! Today marks the beginning of a new year in the life-cycle of the Church. It is Advent once more! Still “happy new year” sounds strangely out of sync, doesn’t it? Why would the Church’s calendar signal a time of “beginnings,” when the rest of the world is fixated on “endings”? Our **holiday calendars** are counting down the final shopping days until Christmas, our **tax calendars** remind us that there are but a few short weeks left in 2015 to make year-end contributions to our charitable giving, and our **football calendars** tell us that the season is coming to its climactic end with championship games in the next few weeks. ‘Tis the season of endings, not beginnings, isn’t it? Just look outside at the trees, lifting their boney-fingered branches in prayer toward the cold sky; a chilling reminder that warmer leafy seasons are long gone.

But for the Church, the year *is* just beginning. In the Church we begin marking time with Advent, with its message of waiting, a season of “not yet”, of promise, of hope for the coming of God. Advent invites us to reset our **spiritual calendar** for great expectations and new beginnings, precisely because the world’s mindset is focused on endings. Just as retailers urge us to buy all new things, Christian faith dares to believe in a God who promises happiness by making all things new.

But as we consider these things, our minds race to the urgent and curious questions: just how and where, and most important . . . when will God come to start this new beginning of His? We want dates and details. That is why we are so fascinated by the predictions of doom from those who interpret the calendars

and predictions of the ancient Mayans and Nostradamus. Tell us the end of the world is coming in the year 2016 and you have our attention. That kind of detail is the stuff of movies and documentaries and best-selling books.

But the scriptures of Advent offer no such straightforward details to satisfy our curiosity or fire up our fear. When the Bible talks about the timing and action of God the language is usually obscure, a collection of hints, whispers, and poetry. And that is certainly true of the lessons we read today. And yet, there are some guiding themes that keep coming through in these passages of Holy Scripture. It may not offer a clear roadmap, or mark an unmistakable “X” on a calendar, but the Bible does offer us some guidelines for us as we wait on God in this season of beginnings.

First, the scripture invites faithful waiting on God in order to cultivate in us a sense of expectancy. If we were given details and dates for God’s coming we would have little urgency until the last moments before the final day. Remember our procrastination pattern back in school when a term paper due in December was announced at the beginning of the semester in August? Three months of inactivity on that assignment, followed by one week of heroic late-night cramming. And the result? A mediocre term paper. Well, God remembers how we studied back then too. And maybe that is why God did not give us an exact timetable for His actions in human history. We are likely to waste time, and anything else, until it becomes scarce. Instead, God asks us to lean into the future with openness and hope, trusting Him to act even when the universe seems to be hopelessly off course.

God invites all of to be open to wonder and mystery, to nurture deep within us the possibility that God is closer than we can think or imagine, because with God all things are possible.

It is a sad and empty life that has lost its ability, or its will, to hope. If you knew this was your last month to live, imagine how productive and proactive you would be? There would be no time lost to second-rate agenda items, no energy wasted on trivial pursuits. What would you do if you knew time was short? We would likely spend some of our remaining time saying “I love you” and “I forgive you.” We would live and love more deeply. We might laugh more freely, and give more generously. We would think a bit more seriously about God, and about eternity. We would try to leave our loved ones a lasting legacy of wisdom and memories, instead of money. Well, you get the picture. And God is simply asking us to go ahead and live like that anyway—for our sakes, and for the sake of the world we might change if we stopped putting off our lives. We do not know exactly when God is coming to earth, or when we are leaving it. We do not have to.

But this we know there is one day less today than there was yesterday. And we are one day closer to the birth of whatever new thing God is planning for creation. So, we need get on with the expectant life. Time’s too short for anything less.

The second thing the scriptures whisper to us about the coming of God is that it is not a day to dread, but to celebrate. The scraggly street evangelist with his sandwich board sign heralding the end of the world usually seems to picture that day as an appointment

with an angry God. As one bumper sticker put it, “Jesus is coming again . . . and boy, is he mad!” But look again at our scriptures for today. Jeremiah speaks of a day when God comes to fulfill promises and provide security for those who wait for Him. St. Paul foretells a day when the Lord comes to inaugurate a blameless and holy life with the saints. And Luke’s Gospel records the words of Jesus telling us to approach the Day of the Lord by standing tall, lifting our faces to God, for our redemption is at hand. These do not sound like dire warnings so much as glad announcements. It changes everything if the phrase, “Prepare to meet your God,” is an invitation to face a forgiving God who is smiling at us with great love, a God who is coming to meet us with the same joy and delight that He wants to see in us. And this is the message of Advent.

We wait for God, not with a sense of dread, like patients waiting for test results. No, we wait with boundless hope for God to come, like expectant parents waiting to hear their baby’s first cry, like wedding guests waiting to glimpse a bride coming down the aisle, like eager Thanksgiving hosts waiting for the doorbell to ring announcing the arrival of cherished guests. We wait, not for the end of days, but for the beginning of a new day; a day only God could bring into being.

So, we ask, is this the end? Oh no, this is just the beginning and with joyful anticipation we pray “come, Lord Jesus, come!”