



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our beautiful Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent is a season that has been imbued with multiple meanings. Most often it's seen as a time to count down to Christmas day. Now technically, Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas Day, so it can begin as early as November 27th, or like this year, as late as today, December 3rd. So in the church, we mark Advent by marking each of the four Sundays by lighting a candle on the Advent wreath, until Christmas day where we light all five candles, the four candles and the middle one, the white one called the Christ candle.

Now, outside these church walls, Advent begins December 1st and it's considered the 24 days leading up to Christmas. And keeping track of Advent is really helpful in the world because it helps you figure out how many days you have left to buy gifts for everybody who's on your list, to write and mail, all of those Christmas cards, or upload all those addresses to Shutterfly as the case may be. Or bake all those Christmas cookies to give away. Or if you're lucky like me, give cranberry bread to your favorite priest, which I really enjoy quite a bit. And I actually have a source in this congregation.

So really the world best knows the Advent season for Advent calendars. In which you open up a door each day of December and find a goodie. Now after service, when you have a moment, Google weird Advent calendars and you'll see these options that you can have to mark this time of waiting, like an Advent cheese calendar with 24 different kinds of cheese or a beer calendar, or my personal favorite, an Advent STEM calendar with 24 different shocking science tricks available at Target for \$34.99

In the church, the Advent season has been marked since at least the fifth century as a time of penitence and fasting. Believe it or not, since it is supposed to be a time of preparation, not just for the birth of Jesus, but first and foremost, and primarily for the second coming or the final coming of the adult Jesus Christ, as is promised in our gospel text. And of course, this theme of Advent is less well known and surprisingly less popular.

So every year your average priest like me has to figure out how much time am I going to spend trying to convince you all that preparing for the final coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of Man with all His glory, is something that you need to do, even as you go to your endless Christmas parties during Advent, and decorate

your house for the big day of Jesus' birth during Advent, and not decorating your house for His final arrival where there's promised some sort of cataclysmic end to the world that is preceded by great suffering. I mean, how do you decorate a fireplace mantle with that?

Now, in all fairness, I think our little congregation does a beautiful job of balancing both arrivals of Jesus Christ. Yes, we have Christmas trees, lots of them. And yes, we have Christmas parties and celebrations throughout the month of Advent. And yes, we will have next week the Festival of Gifts, which is a living Nativity scene that will happen right here with a manger and hay and everything inside of it that our wonderful acolytes put on with their animal companions during the season of Advent. But it allows you to become the wise men and you come bearing gifts that will go to our community partners so people can have a wonderful Christmas. And you come and adore the Christ child during Advent.

And yes, we have carols and chocolate, which is new this year. We're going to have it during Advent. And we've invited the PRISM Choir, which is the community gay men's choir, to sing festive songs to us. And we're going to have a dramatic reading of a Christmas Story by O Henry, and we're going to have a full hot chocolate bar afterwards that you can make a beautiful concoction during Advent.

But we also have Advent Lessons in Carols, which will happen tonight at 5:00 PM. And this is my shameless plug for it. You need to come and experience this beautiful service tonight with gorgeous music that will have enormous power on you to center you and claim your imagination on the world that God has planned for us that is not here yet. And we have tomorrow, Advent by Candlelight, for the women of the congregation, who are called to come and spend some of their very precious time during this incredibly busy season for them, to remember the profound themes of Advent: hope and peace and joy and love.

And next week, all of you will be invited to create an Anglican rosary that you can use and pray together during the season of Advent. And a rosary is a lovely, rhythmic, mesmerizing way to calm yourself down and enter into a space of communing with the God who will bring you into a world through the power of Jesus Christ, where all death becomes new life. Mercy is the norm. War ceases to exist, and all that is dark is forever infused with a radiant, eternal light.

However you decide to spend these precious days in December, it is my responsibility to somehow bring the theme of the final coming of Jesus Christ among the clouds to bear on your life and your observance of the Advent season. So let me attempt to do that now through two poems and a story about Jesus. So even though we are 22 days from Jesus' birth, in the reading from the Gospel of Mark that we have, we are just four days from Jesus' death. Our

reading comes from Mark chapter 13, and Jesus is crucified in Mark chapter 15. Good Friday is looming in front of Jesus. And these are some of the final words that He says to His disciples.

And I was thinking about the Jesus that we encounter here in this moment. What was He like? What was He thinking? What was He feeling? He was in his early thirties. He was a young man. He had just spent maybe three years with this band of brothers and He wandered around the land with them. And they taught together, they healed together, they prayed together. He loves these men and He knows it's going to be hard for them when He dies. He knows how much is going to be asked of them, and He wants to make sure that their dreams are not shattered, that their hopes are not crushed, that the longing for the life that Jesus promised them does not die with Him.

So in His last days on Earth, Jesus promises the disciples and us that even though there may seem to be a delay to the culmination of God's reign in the world, even though the pain and the agony that we go through on Earth is severe, none of this means that Jesus will not fulfill the promise to come again and remake the world in the image of Heaven. The delay is not to be interpreted as a failure. Jesus wants to assure you, keep dreaming, keep hoping, keep longing both for yourself and this blessed earth that is falling apart as we speak. And so He tells his beloved friends, keep awake. Don't dull your senses thinking I cannot fulfill what I promised you. Cultivate your dreams. Feel your longings. I will bring a new Heaven and a new Earth where love will reign supreme among you and all beings. I will institute a new order where grace and mercy abound. Until then, stay with me and keep awake to those hopes that I have placed deep inside of you.

And to me, this is one of the most profound themes of Advent. Our preparation is not just for Jesus to come as a child, but we are being prepared for that profound reminder that things on Earth have not yet been completed. So in December, can you spend some time dreaming those dreams a little bit more clearly in your darkness? When Jesus comes, even on December 25th, will He find you dreamless and asleep in your life, or will He find you fully alive to your hopes and desires for a better life for you and for others? I love that we have a God who wants us not to be afraid of wanting more than we already have because it is those desires that actually makes room for the intervention of awaiting God.

The first poem I want to share with you is one of my favorite poems of all time. It is super short, seven lines, and it is not printed in your bulletin, so you got to listen to me. It was written in 1951 by Langston Hughes, and it's called "Harlem." Hughes was considered one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance in the thirties. By the forties, Harlem was experiencing racial unrest and the problems

of segregation and broken promises. So Hughes penned a book of poems called *A Montage of a Dream Deferred*. The poem, "Harlem," was among the most famous in the book. And I think that you may recognize what happens inside of you when your hope begins to decay.

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes knew that dreams that remained unfulfilled can die. But he also knew that dreams that remain alive can change everything. What keeps you from dreaming about something better for you? What prevents you from longing for change? Jesus is reminding us today, keep awake to the dream deferred. Do not be deterred by the waiting for things to be changed. Do not give up because of disappointment. Keep awake to your longings and your hopes and your dreams deep inside you. You were meant to have those dreams. They were given to you by God.

So how can we live faithfully with unrealized desires? The second poem I would like to offer you is a little longer, and it is printed in its entirety in your bulletin. It was penned by Stanley Kunitz, who was the poet laureate twice in his lifetime. He lived to be 101 years old. And during his lifetime, he experienced a lot of grief. His first wife, whom he adored, he loved without abandon one day, disappeared and never returned to him. He was 73 years old when he wrote this poem, "The Layers," and shortly before this poem, his mother had died, his two sisters had died, and several of his dearest friends had died. And so this poem is actually a beautiful telling of how to survive when everything has been taken from you.

And it was the last stanza that reminded me of the end times that Jesus spoke to when He said, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and

the stars will fall from heaven and the Son of Man will come in the clouds. There's an echo of this in Kunitz's poem that points to how we may situate ourselves in such turmoil, holding on to our dreams deferred and our longings unrealized. And it turns out that the voice that Stanley Kunitz refers to in the poem was actually real. He had a terrible dream one night, and at the end of this terrifying dream, these words came to him out of nowhere. It was a voice in the clouds, speaking riddles, and the whole entire poem flowed from those two lines the voice said to him. And here's the last stanza of the poem.

In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered  
and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice  
directed me:  
"Live in the layers,  
not on the litter."  
Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.  
I am not done with my changes.

You and I are not done with our changes. We are holders of dreams deferred, and we're holders of the wreckage of our lives. But we also believe in a Jesus Christ who enters the world to explode our dreams and transform and change us within and without. Can you promise yourself this advent season not to be afraid to live in the layers of those buried hopes because God is keeping those hopes alive in you right now.

Keep awake to the longings that are deep inside of you, to be who you are fully meant to be. Keep awake to those dreams that seem like they're never going to be fulfilled. Keep awake to those childlike visions that you have of a world that is filled with goodness and peace and love. And my guess is if you do this deliberately this Advent season, when Christmas comes and you are prepared for the Christ child to enter into the world, that very child who's going to fulfill your very dreams, it is going to be that much sweeter. A blessed Advent season to you all.

Amen.