

Is it just me or does Christmas seem to be invading the Thanksgiving holiday? As a pastor I'll be the first referee to throw an encroachment flag on Christmas. Now don't get me wrong I love Christmas! But it just seems the Christmas commercials and Christmas songs on the radio start earlier and earlier each year. Call it bolstering the economy with black Friday deals bigger and longer than ever so we can be smart and get an upper hand on Christmas shopping, which there's nothing wrong with that. I was there in the thick of it with Kendall and Kendall's mom. I just think when it comes to the Christmas season we are impatient. We are ready now!

I remember when I was a kid I would wake up in the middle of the night sneak down stairs to take a peak to see if Santa had eaten his cookies. I thought I was so sneaky. I even would recruit my sister in on secret operations to be on look out and take turns keeping a lookout for missing milk and cookies and the magical appearance of a boot disappearing up the chimney and presents under the tree. Even on Christmas morning we are impatient. However, we know the exact day Christmas comes. Imagine if we didn't. Imagine each year Christmas was like waiting for a baby to be born.

"But about that day and hour no one knows," Jesus says, "neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Anyone who has waited for a baby to come can tell you that they don't always come on schedule. You can't really put that trip to the hospital on your calendar. You just do all you can to be ready and then you wait for labor to begin. It must have been that way for Joseph and Mary. I know the baby will come, but I don't know when. I know Santa will come, but I don't know when. I know the presents will come, but I don't know when. I know Jesus will come again, but I don't know when. Living in a state of constant readiness is difficult. Learning that in the Season of Advent seems oddly appropriate, but not especially

comforting. Is this how we are supposed to wait for the second coming of Christ? With clothes laid out beside the bed? With calluses on our knees? Waiting and watching eyes peeled through the stairway railings on the chimney and Christmas tree. Probably so. Even so, ive been told, try as you might to be ready the birth of a child can sneak up on you, like the first snow of winter, like a thief in the night. The coming of Christ caught his mother in a strange town, miles away from the comforts of home and the help of her local midwife. “Not now,” she groaned when the first pain came. “Not here.” She must have known that it would come soon, but if she had known exactly when the child would come don’t you think she might have been better prepared, and not caught giving birth in a barn? But the Second Coming of Christ is even less predictable and so, says Jesus, we must be ready all the time, with our clothes laid out, and calluses on our knees and eyes peeled. But also with our hearts full of hope, like children waiting for Christmas to come, like a woman expecting a child. For so long the idea of the Second Coming has been wrapped in such frightening images that we have stopped talking about it much in churches today. “For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man,” Jesus warns in our Gospel lesson. “For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matthew 24:37-44). It’s a little frightening, isn’t it? All that talk about floods catching people

unaware, and others being snatched away, and thieves breaking into the house? Earlier in this same chapter Jesus talks about the sun being darkened, and the moon not giving its light, and the stars falling from the sky. He talks about great suffering, such as has never been from the beginning of the world until now, and never will be again. He talks about fleeing to the mountains, and he pities those who are pregnant or nursing infants in those days. “Pray that it might not happen in winter,” he says. All of which only makes you want to skip chapter 24 altogether and turn back to those first couple of chapters where you can read about the birth of a baby whose name was called Immanuel, “God with us.” That would be better, wouldn’t it? Certainly more comforting. But the world in which we now live will not be corrected by such a silent night as that first one. At the deepest level of our need we long for the coming of someone who will have the power to do what needs to be done: to make the wrong right, the crooked straight, the rough places plain. We look for the one who will let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). The early Christians, who suffered persecution at the hands of Nero and other Roman emperors and who were powerless to stop it in their revolts prayed for the Second Coming of Christ. They had heard of his return from his disciples and they waited for it with pounding hearts, watching the skies like children longing for the first snowfall of winter. “Maranatha!” they prayed. “Come, Lord Jesus!” Because they believed with all their hearts that the one who came again would be the same one who had come before. I believe that. We are in a premillennial age waiting and watching. And I believe that if we haven’t yet earnestly prayed for the Second Coming of Christ then we haven’t yet understood how much our world is in need of such deliverance. We still remember today how it was in those days after September 11, 2001. Listening to others speak about the months that followed after the tragedy they watched the news not of the coming snow or Christmas commercials but for

airplanes being used as missiles against us. We lived in that state of constant readiness not for the birth of a baby but for the next terrorist attack. Perhaps for the first time in centuries we, like those early Christians, began to see the real need for the Second Coming, and begin to long for it and pray for it. Surely if anyone could set the world right it would be Jesus Christ. With that in mind we might want to ask ourselves the question: if Jesus were to come again, just because we need him, just because we've waited so long, would we be ready? Because if there's any truth to this text—and I think there is—his coming will be like Christmas not on any given date, but simply when the time is right. And when that time comes we wouldn't want to be caught sleeping. We would want to be wide awake. So, as you shop for presents in the weeks ahead, as you trim the tree and string the lights, as you stock the pantry and send out cards, as you get ready in all those ways for the annual celebration that will come on December 25th, don't forget to get ready for that other celebration that will come. —Jim Somerville © 2019