

Watching©**Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37****Advent 1****Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

Sharlyn: (All decked out with Christmas elf hat, jingle bells jewelry, looking at Target ad.)

It's here! Yes! It's here! All the sales and shopping and wrapping. Black Friday is past, but there are still plenty of sales to run to. You just have to watch, to look carefully at the ads. Watch for the signs! And if you don't want to get all dolled up to out in public – like I am – remember - Cyber Monday is tomorrow! You can shop in your pajamas!

Oh, I've been working out, getting strong, building up these muscles so I can run all day from store to store and then do my baking and my wrapping. I'll have Christmas done in no time with all this

Fred: Wait! Wait! Wait a minute. What are doing? What are talking about?

Sharlyn: I'm talking about getting ready for Christmas, of course. There shopping and wrapping and decorating and don't forget baking and

Fred: Wait! Aren't you forgetting something?

Sharlyn: Oh gosh! I've forgotten something? Is it a sale? Is it a coupon? Is it a party?

Fred: Aren't you forgetting Advent? You know ... Advent ... waiting ... watching ... preparing ... reflecting ... you know ... JESUS?

Sharlyn: Well, of course I'm not forgetting Jesus. Baby Jesus on Christmas Eve ... Mary and Joseph and the manger and the camels and the goats and the cows and the shepherd boys and the wise guys ...

Fred: Well, Of course we celebrating Jesus' birth on Christmas Eve – and especially on Christmas Day – which, by the way, we will celebrate right here, with Christmas Day being on Sunday this year.

Sharlyn: What???? We have to come to church on Christmas DAY????

Fred: Well, ... tell me again what we are celebrating?

Sharlyn: Ummmm The birth of Jesus, of course.

Fred: And who are we people who come to church?

Sharlyn: People who love Jesus and who celebrate his coming and his death and resurrection.

Fred: And wouldn't that make Christmas on Sunday pretty special?

Sharlyn: You've got a point there.

Fred: But ... still ... what about Advent? A time to watch. A time to wait. A time to prepare. Have you forgotten Advent?

Advent I can always count on Fred to bring me back to my senses. To remind me of what is important.

I've watched those ads on television this past week, building up to Black Friday, and found myself getting – not worked up for going shopping – but rather irritated. Of course, I think we're all glad to put up with the commercials if it helps give our economy a little boost.

But really, while shopping and wrapping and decorating and baking probably will happen for most of us, we know that isn't the focus of Advent – this season that leads up to the celebration of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But, even if we, in the church, are not focused on the material things that our secular world draws our attention to, we still have temptations. We Christians have this great temptation to skip Advent and rush right into Christmas – even in our worship. We would usually prefer to sing our favorite Christmas carols instead of singing Advent hymns. We would rather hear the well known Scriptures about Jesus' birth than these wild and crazy predictions of the end times.

But if we do that – if we skip over this important time, then we truly might miss the best Christmas gift of all.

Advent means coming. It is a time of preparation for the coming of a particularly special event or person. Although the origin of Advent is unknown, Christians have observed Advent since at least the 6th century.

In Advent, we acknowledge that Jesus has come, yet we also believe in, and wait for his coming again someday. And so we spend some time thinking about that.

That problem is – Jesus told his disciples that the things he was describing would happen in their own generation. Earthquakes, wars, rumors of wars – destruction of the temple, terrible persecution. And, actually, all those things did happen about 70 years later in a horrific war with the Romans.

Yet, it seems that wasn't the only thing Jesus was predicting. He talks about his own coming again in glory. He quotes Old Testament prophets in regards to judgment day. He seems to be saying to more than just his contemporaries of the day to be watching; to be ready for his coming.

We know that over the years many people have predicted the time and the hour of when it would happen. There are those who have dropped everything to get ready for the big event just to find it didn't happen.

There are many who believe that all the signs are there right now – earthquakes and wars and everything Jesus predicted. But actually, those things had happened when he said it and they have happened over the centuries. And still we wait.

The thing is ... those who make those predictions forget what Jesus said – “No one – not even Jesus himself – no one but God knows the day or the hour when it will happen. That's why it's so important to be ready.”

There are so many who love to use these passages – these apocalyptic Scriptures about the end times – as ways to scare people into believing in God. You'd better watch out, because Jesus is coming and he's gonna get ya!

I think there is a Christmas song about it – doesn't it go like this?

You'd better watch out, you'd better not cry, you'd better not pout I'm telling you why – Oh no, that's not it. That's about Santa Claus. Never mind.

Friends, I invite you to think about these things during Advent:

In a time when the world seems to be mad with hatred, war, hunger, people losing homes, jobs are hard to find – in this time when we live in a world of contradictions and frenzy – we know we are need of something deeper, something more than what we are finding.

Advent is a time for realizing just what it is we really want for Christmas. It is a time for the hope that comes with the promises of God to return to us and save us from our selves; a time for us to watch with great expectation as we prepare for opening up our hearts and minds to receive the good news of peace and healing and wholeness once again.

The author, Kathleen Norris, writes about our reading from Isaiah, in the article “Apocalypse Now,” published in the Christian Century journal in 2005:

“Isaiah's ‘Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down’ is the cry of a people who realize that they've made such a mess of the world that only God can set it right. And this reflects a truth of personal experience: that it's only after a

crisis, with the stars falling from our sky and the ground shaking beneath our feet, that we see clearly -- that we remember what is worth caring about – and what is not.

The word *apocalypse* simply means to reveal, to uncover, and if facing reality brings us despair, we need to ask why. Above all, we must reject the literalist notion that apocalyptic literature is about a future pie in the sky. It is a command to come to full attention in the here and now. And that is hard to do.”

Even as we prepare to celebrate the birth of God who became human in Jesus; and even as we hope for the day when that same Jesus who lived and died and rose from the dead will come again to finally establish the Kingdom of God in all it's full, complete glory – where, as the Scripture says: there will be no more tears, no more crying –

Even with His coming being both behind us and before us – Advent is a call to live in the moment. It brings us to a slower place, right smack dab in the middle of the craziness of the season's doings, and it reminds us to watch.

Watch for what? you might ask.

Watch for signs. You have to stay awake, to be alert to see these signs. The signs of Advent are mixed in with all the other signs – you know the ones that point to sales and shopping and great places to eat and to party.

The signs of Advent are signs of Christ's coming anew – a place where love floods in, where someone helps someone else, where the first is last and gives the last a chance to be first. It is a place where forgiveness surprises and happens unexpectedly, where husbands and wives find reconciliation and renewed joy in being together. It is a place of acceptance and inclusion rather than exclusion. It is the place where children find their way back home.

Advent is a place where grace is the unexpected gift of the day.

But, I'm telling you - if you don't stay alert in this crazy time, you are likely to miss it. Be in a state of watching. Stay awake. You don't know – you just never know – when He will come to you in new and beautiful ways – full of grace and truth.

You really don't want to miss Advent, now do you?