

Doors 1-24
A Sermon by David Barker
December 11, 2011

Scripture: Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Every Christmas when I was growing up, my mom bought an Advent calendar

--one of those calendars with 25 little doors...a door for each day, December 1 to Christmas Day, that, when opened, revealed a little wrapped present or a candy cane or a baby animal...

--until the double doors of December 25 behind which lay baby Jesus in a manger

--the purchasing of the calendar was no accident because my mom was no fool

--she'd learned the best way to handle my incessant questioning, "How much longer 'til Santa Claus comes?" was the countdown calendar

--it was, from her perspective, money well spent, because it purchased more than a calendar... it purchased my silence and her some peace and quiet

--it may have helped *her* nerves but it didn't do much for mine because I just wasn't very good at waiting

--the closer it got to Christmas Eve, the worse I got

--I remember lying in bed all night Christmas Eve, watching the clock in abject misery, agonizing until 6:00 a.m.

--zero-hour, the time—not a minute sooner—my brother and I could drag our our bleary-eyed parents out of bed to see what Santa had brought us

--part of the challenge was that I pretty much knew how the story ended

--long before, I'd sat down with the Sears toy catalog, compiled in excruciating detail my want-list, and made sure mom and dad had gotten it into Santa's hands

--so I knew, as I tossed and turned in bed, watching the clock: come six o'clock, dashing down the hallway to the living room, dragging two exhausted parents behind me, most of what was on that list awaited me beneath the tree

--but part of the challenge, too, was age...kids and waiting don't go together

Advent comes from a Latin word: *adventus*, which means “coming”

--since we know something’s coming, Advent necessarily is about *waiting*

--as a boy, I knew about that...Thanksgiving to Christmas, 30 days of waiting

--30 days to be endured not because there was anything, to my mind, to be gained from the waiting itself...

--but to be endured because it was the only way to get to the real point of the season to begin with

--which was, of course, the coming together in our living room beneath a tree of Christmas morning and my Christmas list

--because I knew how and I knew when the story ended, because the point of the story *was* its end, the process, the unfolding of those 30 days got lost in my laser-like focus on Christmas morning

--from the moment I opened door #1 on the Advent calendar, I knew what I’d find behind door #25...opening each door in between counted for nothing more than putting a big, black “X” across another day

So, during Advent, I did not wait...I marked time

--I marked time the way the earliest followers of Jesus marked time

--they, too, knew how the story ended

--He’s coming back and we’re all going to the New Jerusalem

--knew how it would end and, so they thought, *when*

--their response, not unlike mine, was to focus on that end time, laser-like, to the exclusion of everything else

--some, sure it was a done deal, also partied like there was no tomorrow because, in fact, there might not be

--either way, they—and I—missed the point

--as much as this particular story of God-become-flesh, of Emmanuel, God-with-us, is about its ending, it is just as much...in fact, maybe even *more*, about what happens in the meantime

--the waiting is not about marking time because that’s a waste of time...the waiting is about what we do, how we *live*, while we wait

Jesus couldn’t say it much more plainly than he does

--the end is the end but *that* is God’s business...*our* business is what we do right now, right this very day

--the end of this particular story—the Second Coming—is pretty knock-your-socks-off spectacular, make no mistake about it...but our life is not *there*...it’s *here*

--I don’t know how much Jesus would’ve agreed on with John Lennon, but I’m pretty sure he’d have seconded Lennon’s admonition that life is what happens while we’re busy making plans for the future

--glorious as what we’re waiting for is, life is in the waiting itself

This, I think, is much of the mystery of Advent, and the message we tend to miss
--so quick are we come Thanksgiving to start talking about what's behind door
#25, we don't take the time to really reflect on the 14-year-old virgin behind
door #3, the Carpenter on his way to Bethlehem behind door #12, the angel
Gabriel behind door #15
--like the shepherds we'd find behind door #24, we're in a hurry to get to that
manger in that stable as fast as we can
--but what Advent says to us is: *wait...wait*, slow down...take this, please, one
step at a time
--this story, in so many ways, *is* about you...but it's not *your* story
--this story is *for* you, but it is a story God tells, in God's time

I remember when Christopher and Jessica were younger: any trip in the car to a point further
from home than the mailbox became an endless, ongoing discussion of itinerary: where are we
going? why are we going? how long will it take? when will we get there?
--did Terry and I try to encourage them: don't worry about it, sit back, relax, look
out the window?...yes...did it work?...no
--maybe it's hardwired into our DNA...ever since Eve saw that apple and decided
she wasn't content to just sit back and relax, we human beings are not very
good at waiting, at process
--we tend to be *very* goal- and results-oriented

Sidney Poitier made a television movie called *The Simple Life of Noah Dearborn*
--he plays a man, a carpenter, who lives alone and makes by hand virtually
everything he needs
--a lawyer, trying to keep Noah from being run-off his land by a real estate
developer, asks him at one point...all this stuff you make, all the time you
spend making it...you've got the money, why not just go to the store and buy
it?
--Noah tells her: it's not about making the stuff...it's about what making the
stuff makes of me

So it is, I think, with Advent..
--the end is good, but so, too, rightly pursued, is the waiting because the waiting,
rightly pursued, makes something of us we otherwise would not be

"Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light," writes the Apostle Paul. *"Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires"*

- wake-up and smell the coffee, Paul is saying, get busy
 - busy not marking time, not doing things just for the sake of doing them, but busy proactively staying focused on living a moral, Christ-like life
 - get busy, in other words, living for the Kingdom
 - because, to paraphrase John Lennon once more, the Kingdom is what happens while we're busy making plans
- yes, we know the ending, how this particular story turns out, that Jesus is, indeed, coming
 - yet the words of John the Baptist to those awaiting the Messiah's earthly ministry, an Advent of another sort, are words to you and me as well:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Opening door #25 is glorious—but it's most right when we've mindfully tended to the opening of the first 24

- not unlike Noah Dearborn, what we make of Advent has much to do with what Advent makes of us
- a large part of bearing witness that Jesus Christ is Lord is the conscious, intentional work of making and remaking ourselves every day...
- making and remaking ourselves into the kind of people our commitment to Christ and the Kingdom calls us to be
- it is the work of looking at ourselves and our lives every single moment and striving to conform ourselves not to our own liking, according to our own needs and agendas, but to the image of God in which we were created
 - the time to do this is one of the great gifts of Advent
- and it's work we don't do alone...we are guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit amid a community of like-minded brothers and sisters in the body of Christ
 - in giving our lives to Jesus, we give our *selves* to Jesus, and that takes conscious, intentional effort
 - to the extent we do, our actions mirror perhaps the most profound Advent mystery of all
 - God gave God's life for us, the self that was Jesus of Nazareth ...a giving that began in a stable in a backwater wide-spot in the road called Bethlehem

Advent is more than a means to an end, time endured until the clock says it's time to dash down the hallway to the gifts of Christmas morning...*more*, because Advent, rightly understood, rightly lived, bears extraordinary gifts of its own