

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day, we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now, may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints?

The Word of God
The Word of Life

This is an everything Sunday. Thanksgiving just passed, Advent is just starting, and Christmas is just coming. All these themes are appropriate for today's message.

So, let's start with Thanksgiving. It's a secular holiday, true, but for people of faith, it is also a deeply spiritual time to thank God for the abundance of gifts God bestows upon us.

I hope the time of the Thanksgiving holiday was a time of blessing for you. I trust you got a chance to focus with gratitude for all the blessings and people who mean so much to us, those people and things that bring joy to our hearts. I was blessed to be home in St. Louis with my family. But as I wrote that, I felt something was incomplete about it. Being home in Saint Louis was wonderful, but unlike many of you, I am so fortunate to be blessed with two homes, one in Saint Louis and one here. This is also my home and family.

Even though last week's message was based on Paul giving thanks for one of his churches, it doesn't hurt to repeat it. It is almost always to maintain an attitude of gratitude. It is powerful to say thank you. Usually, we can't give thanks enough, and sometimes, we forget to thank people for all the wonder and kindness they exhibit. I know I do. So again, this week, thank you for being you, for all you are, and for all

you do. Although those may seem the same, there are some differences. I am thankful for you as people created in the image of the living God. That's who you are. In addition, I am thankful that you live out lives of gratitude and faith with deeds of love and service. That's what you do. And like Paul, I can't say thank you enough. So with Turkey and all the fixins just behind us or maybe the leftovers still with us as we come to Advent, today is the first Sunday of Advent. For most of us, it is a strange kind of time that stands between Thanksgiving and Christmas. We know we light candles on the four Sundays before Christmas, and some of us remember that the themes of those Sundays in order are hope, peace, joy, and love, and the candles are purple with one pink, which is the joy candle. For the last twelve years, we have sung "Light One Candle," which I have used all my time in ministry, except once. Once, I changed it, and my wife told me I used the wrong song. It's not Advent without "Light One Candle"! And so, it has been the Advent song for lighting the candles for all my time in ministry with that one hiccup.

Many have said that sometimes, only halfway in jest, it is the time that stands in the way of the good stuff, the Christmas stuff. We want Christmas Carols, not Advent Dirges. But as the song goes, "You Can't Hurry Love." Carol Patterson put it this way in what she calls a remix:

You can't hurry God
You just have to wait
Trust and give God time
No matter how long it takes
We serve a God you can't hurry,
You don't have to worry;
God may not come when you want God
But God is always right on time right on time.

We can't hurry Christmas and Advent reminds us of that. But we can't ignore Christmas either. It looms large. We must spend Advent preparing for Christmas, with Christmas looking over our shoulders. We may not be able to hurry Christmas this time of year, but we can't ignore Christmas either.

Having said that, I have still changed my approach to Advent. I am no longer an Advent Purist. Jimmy Buffett has a song, "Cultural Infidel," and I am an Advent

Infidel. I used to hold off on all the Christmas stuff, including the hymns, until Christmas Eve. I was going to do the season of Advent and do it right, just like the liturgical purists insisted.

But two things happened: one is the decorations, like our beautiful downtown decorations. The coming Christmas can't be ignored. And from Halloween on, there has been a build-up toward Christmas. Second, I got more resistance from church people than anything in my ministry. No longer. I try now to honor Advent and its themes and meaning without missing the joy and anticipation of the coming of Christmas. In that spirit, we will decorate the church for Christmas after worship today as we look forward to and prepare for Christmas.

Also, one seminary professor reminded us that we must carefully pick the battles we want to fight. This was not the one I wanted to pick. It seemed like a no-win situation, and besides, I didn't want to win anyway. I, too, wanted more Christmas.

So, what is this mysterious season of the church year? To me, it is a time of looking forward and backward. Forward to Christmas and the Second Coming and back to that first Christmas and Creation.

It is the first season of the Church Year. Theologically, it is a time of getting ready for the coming of Jesus in Bethlehem and at the end of time, and I think it is like the Carly Simon song used in the Heinz Ketchup commercial, Anticipation. It showed people waiting for the Ketchup to pour. Advent is a time of waiting and anticipation. But it is also a time of remembering God's acts of creation and sending Jesus. And the easiest way for me to see it is that it reminds us that we live in between times; between the times of the birth of Jesus and his coming again in glory. Between the times God created the world and sent Christ in love, we anticipate that Christ will come again, the second coming.

That second coming is the hard part. One pastor put it this way: you know what MAGA stands for, well, with the Second Coming is MEGO. This stands for my eyes glaze over (From the Christian Century commentary on this Passage. Couldn't find the author.), which seems to be the response he felt from most people when they hear about the second coming. Maybe they remember the "Left Behind Series" or "The

Late Great Planet Earth” books that spoke of the end times. They were popular many years ago. However, to me, they were more like science fiction and fantasy.

Folks' eyes glaze over because we really don't know what to make of the second coming of Jesus. So, Advent has a dual focus on the coming of Jesus at Christmas and his return at the end of time. People have a hard time with his return at the end of time. While I trust in Jesus' return in glory at the end of time, I don't have a literal understanding of exactly how it will happen or what it will entail. Still, it makes sense to me that the God who began a good work in creation sent Jesus to show us how to live and will complete the good work and bring all of creation home. God started this, and God will finish it. And we stand between the start and the finish.

For me, the second coming is that sure and certain knowledge that the God who began all this will bring it to a glorious fruition.

In that sense, it is a season of hope for those who live in that in-between time of creation and new creation. We know that creation has not been abandoned, and God is not finished. It's a time of patience in anticipating Christmas and the restoration of all things; for many of us, patience is not our strong suit. Especially when we feel overwhelmed, our world feels like it is falling apart. But it is not doing nothing; it is active, waiting as we renew our focus on God and the way we are called to live and seek to live that out in a world that is both awesome and dangerous.

But Advent declares boldly that the life of love Jesus lived and taught is the life God created us for, and as we trust and follow Christ, we can live that life. We move with God toward that time, and God brings all things. Advent is the time to trust this bold declaration of the purpose of the living God that we love our God and our neighbor. So, while we anticipate the birth of a Baby, let us also anticipate the time God will restore all things.

As we move to the table, let us give thanks for the abundance of hope, peace, joy, and love Christ gifts us as we look past, live our lives in the present, and trust in God's future. And remember the coming of Christ into the world, our lives, our past, present, and future.

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.