

Watching, Not Waiting: A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent¹

*Catherine Gilliard, co-pastor, New Life Covenant Church,
Atlanta, Georgia*

What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’” (Mark 13:37). Today we begin a new year in our communal life as we enter the season of Advent. Advent is a season of reflection and expectant watching. The name “Advent” comes from the Latin word “*adventus*,” which means “coming.” Throughout the history of the church, Advent has been a period of preparation, as God’s people wait in hope for the coming of their long-promised Messiah. Today God’s people continue to observe this season of preparation, as we too wait in expectant hope for the coming of all Christ has promised.

As we enter into this new church year together, we do so knowing that God’s reign has already broken into our world through Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, but it has not been fully realized. We experience the tension of living in a time when God’s kingdom is near, God’s kingdom is here, and God’s kingdom is coming. In this tension we heed Christ’s call to the church to be alert, watchful, and aware as we prepare for his second and final coming. Our emphasis in this first week of Advent is watching, not waiting, for the fulfillment of the reign of Jesus.

God chose to send Jesus into our world as we all enter it—as a baby. Christ’s earthly incarnation demonstrates a total commitment to our humanity. God takes on human flesh, is born to a mother who was pregnant before marriage, and is raised in an under-resourced community. Jesus, the promised Messiah, enters the day-to-day routines and

1. Adapted from a sermon preached at New Life Covenant Church, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2014. The text for the sermon was Mark 13:24–37, and the version used here is the NIV.

challenges of being human, from the cradle to the grave and beyond the grave. And today God lives *within* us, working through the Holy Spirit day by day and through the word of God and the holy sacraments. Today God makes the ordinary extraordinary and the broken whole, redeeming the past, present, and future, whatever they hold for us. This is the message of Advent. It is the journey where our past, filled with expectant hope for our future, informs our present. On this journey the church is empowered by an unshakeable, eschatological hope that empowers us to be companions in God's redeeming and restoring all that is broken in our world. Our Advent preparation focuses on manifesting God's love with uncommon grace to a chaotic world.

As we read in today's gospel lesson, Jesus's disciples also watched for the unfolding of God's kingdom and sought to understand their role in its unfolding. After Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple (Mark 13:1–2), the disciples ask him two questions: "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" (Mark 13:4). In response Jesus teaches his disciples about the pain and suffering that precede a new birth. Jesus urges the disciples to remain awake so they do not miss God's work in the middle of the chaotic events unfolding around them. Jesus instructs his followers to be alert and aware of present pain so they will be able to recognize the times in which they live. Nine times in Matthew 13 Jesus tells his disciples to watch: "Do you see?" (v. 2). "Watch out that no one deceives you" (v. 5). "You must be on your guard" (v. 9). "So be on your guard" (v. 23). "At that time people will see" (v. 26). "When you see these things happening" (v. 29). "Be on guard! Be alert" (v. 33). "Therefore keep watch" (v. 35). "I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" (v. 37). Nine times this reminder that his disciples are to be alert and watchful.

And this is my call to the church today: we too must be watchful. This week we watched peaceful demonstrators march to the seats of government power in city after city, bringing awareness to racial injustices that plague communities across this nation. Jesus is no stranger to the unrest we have seen; in our text Jesus warns his disciples that persecution will come. Jesus himself and his disciples were betrayed, handed over to authorities, beaten, thrown in jail, and eventually sentenced to death. This is also the journey of justice marked for the church today.

The unrest in city after city is not just about the death of Michael Brown, no matter how badly organizers need a face as a banner for the movement. What is resonating with people throughout this nation is not

the unrest in Ferguson alone. What is resonating in city after city is the sign of simmering tension of systemic racism present across this country, racism that those in positions of influence and power do not want to discuss or confront. What's resonating with people about Ferguson is how signs of racial and class tensions present in their own communities are not being discussed either.

And sadly we, the church, have also been far too silent about the tension arising in our nation—and far too silent about the present signs of God's kingdom breaking through, even as the violence increases. The voices speaking about injustice are rarely people of God who bring the hope of Christ into the dialogue. It's as if we too truly believe that there is another answer to the sinful activities that sustain injustice other than the power of Christ.

Often our silence is rooted in the fact that we feel safer when certain practices legalize the very fears we have internalized. On some level, if we were truthful, we could admit that seeing others as having less value and little worth affects how concerned we are when they are mistreated. We make those being targeted in our society, the “others,” those not like us, believing that those people could never be “us” and we could never be “them.” Some move into neighborhoods that are considered safer, feeling relief because distance now limits their interactions with those who are not like them. But moving into a new community should never mean that we are no longer concerned with the mistreatment of others. Too many have simply accepted the evils of racism, classism, and “otherness” as an acceptable way to live. For far too many, a black life is viewed as not being human but criminal and of little worth. Our black men are often viewed as deviant, and our black women are subjected to being viewed as sexualized objects.

How many times can we witness lawlessness protected by legislation? When will we take time to lament the rate at which black and brown people are being incarcerated and killed? We need to look deeply at what it means to say someone looks suspicious simply because they are different than us as they walk through the neighborhood. We must be on guard and watchful of the number of times we are told to trust the system and believe in the judicial process when reports produced by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reveal deep flaws in this system and process. Is it time to face the tensions that have historically been present in our communities and are now erupting by asking some very different questions?

When we are alert and watchful, we don't miss the signs that the legal,

judicial, political, educational, and medical systems are broken and their processes flawed. The system is broken and the process is flawed when a response, a look, a walk, or an action taken too quickly could cost a black or brown woman or man their life.

As long as the system is broken and the process flawed, black parents must continue to teach their children the realities of being black in America. As long as the system is broken and the process flawed, black and brown men and women will suffer disproportionately when making choices to challenge those in authority. As long as the system is broken and the process flawed, the walls of division will continue to separate communities along lines of race, gender, and class, deepening the tensions that ignite the protests we are witnessing.

Repairing the system and changing the process means noticing the signs and calling on the power of God to change hearts, to convict hearts, and to break the hearts of those who are the “called out one,” the church. The church is called to engage the pain of families losing their sons, fathers, brothers, daughters, mothers, and sisters across our country. The church must weep in sorrow and lament the deaths of those being targeted or profiled. The church must see the leaves on the fig tree emerging and know that summer is near. The church is called to this long journey toward justice, to walk as companions with those being targeted, to be visible in nonviolent protest, and to give voice to the voiceless that God’s power stands in solidarity with justice and mercy. The church must become an advocate for change, partnering in God’s kingdom unfolding, establishing each community it serves as a place where God’s justice reigns. The church must speak boldly in a collective voice about God’s action in our world if we are to bring a new hope that shapes the cities and neighborhoods in which we live. We need to be confident that God’s people, when shaken to their core, will be radical in their response, using spiritual resources to break our silence and lack of involvement in confronting the evil mistreatment of people present in our world.

The church is called to use powerful spiritual resources to engage in the struggle for justice and the liberation of all people. We’ve been given these spiritual resources to demonstrate the power of God in the face of evil: the power of testimony, speaking truth to power, participating in the larger dialogue, and actively engaging in the struggle—all these are means by which the church can participate in the unfolding of God’s kingdom.

The greatest resistance to using our spiritual resources often comes not

from outside forces but from within. We are intimidated, embarrassed, and often unsure of how to speak powerfully about our faith and God's concern for the injustice in this world. Jesus reminds us that resistance to proclaiming our faith will come from those closest to us, those who oppose our views, and from those in positions of influence and power (Mark 13:9–13). Our family members, friends, and neighbors are often uncomfortable with the attention that comes from standing up for justice. But we who believe in the Holy Spirit's power must speak boldly of the ways we see God working in our midst. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit is present with us to guide our steps, to give us words to speak, to embolden us, and to impart wisdom as we meet resistance that will come in the struggle to free those who are targeted, profiled, overlooked, and pushed aside in our society. Those who follow Christ understand that we cannot tell the truth, the whole truth, without talking about God's action in the world and God's care for all people in the world.

So on this first Sunday of Advent, as we light the candle of hope, we not only understand the anger of people who feel as if they have little to live for and nothing to lose; we also lament our treatment of them. As we light the candle of hope, we know that people are tired of being ignored and treated with disrespect. As we light the candle of hope, we know people are tired of being invisible and treated as though they don't matter. The church must be broken, placing ourselves in the difficult work of ministering alongside those who have been left behind and left out in our community. This is exhausting and labor-intensive work.

What is the redemptive story we offer local communities in this time when a great healing is needed? As a local church, we can share with others how this church comes together to discuss the very topics that are tearing communities apart. We have communal conversations on difficult topics as part of our continuing transformation to become the people of God—a new community that longs to be a place where truth can be spoken and understanding and healing can begin.

We can share how we worship a God who understands the anger we hold over the mistreatment of others and how God laments with us. We can share our personal movement in how we view others and our current desire to move to places of deeper understanding and engagement. Our community needs to see an example of people struggling and caring, offending and forgiving, lamenting and loving in ways that heal what's hurting and broken. We can share how the birth of our Restoration and Reconciliation Justice Center brings leaders of ministries together for

two days to engage in peer learning, from practitioners and theologians, about how to raise our awareness of God's vision for the city. This annual gathering is a place where we learn to weep with Jesus over the city.

The birthing of this new kingdom means that there are labor pains that must come before a new community can be born. When Jesus returns, he heralds in a new era of redemption that extends throughout the world, gathering God's elect and redeeming God's people. We don't know the day or the hour, but we are confident that all Jesus promises will come to pass. We don't know the day or the hour, but we are confident that the Holy Spirit guides us out into engagement—and not into the comfort and safety of our homes. We don't know the day or the hour, but we boldly proclaim that it is our faith that leads us to confront evil and dismantle injustice. We don't know the day or the hour, but we must speak and speak now so that our collective voice has impact in shaping all that must change in our treatment of the oppressed and marginalized.

God has given each of us who follow the Lord something to do until Jesus returns. If God sends you out to march, then march for justice. If God sends you to serve, then serve those in need. If God sends you to speak with someone in power to change the system, then go with confidence and do so. When God sends you, you must go.

Jesus calls the church to a journey toward justice. The Holy Spirit calls the church to see what needs to change and then empowers the church to become advocates of that change. God calls the church to embody the power of the cross, crucifying evil and resurrecting God's plan. God heals us! God delivers us! God uses us to proclaim and witness the Holy Spirit's power to bring good news to all who are suffering in this world. So be on guard! Be alert! Keep watch, so that those watching expectantly will not lose hope. It is through us, the church, that the world experiences God's love, forgiveness, and grace. It is we the church who are called to bear witness to God's power to dismantle walls of division and separation through our ministry of restoration, redemption, and reconciliation.