

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our themes for today all center around the letter A. The first A is for Advent. There are four Sundays in the season of Advent, and there are four A's in today's sermon. Advent means “coming.” Something is coming. So what exactly is coming? The first thing that pops into our mind is well, Christmas, of course! And this is true. Advent is a preparatory season. It's preparing us for Christmas. But to get there, we take a meandering pathway. Advent leads us through John the Baptist, preparing a way. He leads us through self-reflection and repentance. John invites us to take a truthful look at ourselves.

And Advent's preparation always begins with a look to the end. It's like when you get a new novel, and you sneak a look at the last page of the book. You want to know how it ends before you start. Well, Advent always grants us that wish! Every year, we begin with apocalyptic texts like today's reading from Luke. (Apocalyptic – now, that's another word that begins with A. But it's not one of my four A's)

Jesus is telling his disciples about how they will know that the end of the world is coming. He describes frightening images of calamity and suffering on a global – no, on a cosmic scale. When it appears that the pillars upon which our world are collapsing, that's when God's redemption is at hand. Jesus tells his disciples, “Be ALERT!” And that's our second A, alert. Many of you enjoy going to Caribou Coffee. They have a motto, does Caribou Coffee. It's “Life is short – stay awake!

That motto perfectly sums up the call of Advent. Stay awake! Be alert! Don't be like the servants who fall asleep at night and miss the coming of their master! Be ready to greet him when he comes! Wake, awake, for night is flying. Advent calls us to remain alert. Look for the signs of God making a new way into our midst.

When I was growing up in Wembley, Alberta, we would frequently have occasion to travel up highway 43 to Grande Prairie. Most people have this notion that Alberta is as flat as a pancake, but believe me, it's not! It's a rolling prairie. The road to Grande Prairie has several curves and ups and downs. But there is one point when the car would cross over the last hilltop and you could see the city in the distance. I always paid special attention and waited for that moment when the “big city” could be seen. It was an active searching.

Advent calls us to be Alert. Keep your eyes open, listen closely with your ears, feel with your heart, search with your inner mind. Be mindful of God's inbreaking. If we are to appreciate the nativity of our Lord, if we are to grasp what his coming into our midst means, we need to remain alert to the signs of God's kingdom as we pray, “Thy kingdom come.”

The third A is Attitude. God comes to bring about something new. That new life and restoration, that consummation of justice and righteousness, it also spells the end of their opposite. Resurrection life means the death of death. God's righteous reign means the toppling of iniquity and corruption. These forces: they don't go without a fight. There will be a clash of powers. How do we respond to struggle and suffering? Jesus tells his disciples to choose hope, not despair. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life,” he says. Escapism is one way we are tempted to deal with hardship and struggle. It could come in the form of a bottle or zoning out on feel-good diversions.

Advent calls us to an attitude check. We don't answer the siren-call of despair. We look instead to our hope in Christ, who makes all things new. This doesn't mean that we take an artificially rosy stance, not at all.

I attended a multi-denominational meeting in Listowel, and during the service I heard a line that really caught my attention: “We don't know where we're going but we're getting there awfully fast.” His line reminded me of an old joke, and after the service I shared it with him. A plane was flying at altitude when the pilot addressed the passengers over the intercom. “Ladies and gentlemen, I've got some good news and some bad news for you. First the bad news. Something has knocked out our navigation system and we have no idea where we are. The good news is, we've caught a tailwind and we're making really good time.” Our attitude of hope is not built on an artificially fabricated world of inflated cheerfulness. It isn't constructed on a fake rosy optimism. It's built on the rock-solid hope that Christ will overcome all things. So, when we despair about the state of our world, remember Jesus' words: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

We keep our attitude focused on hope. However, there is one important distinction we need to be mindful of. As we enter this Christmas cycle, it can be very hard on people who have experienced loss. Christmas blues

are a real thing. The call to hope doesn't invalidate sorrowful feelings and grief. We acknowledge their lament. So we are also Alert to one another. We keep a caring eye on those who are faced with real sorrow.

A is for....

- We have Advent. We're embarking on this 4-week season.
- We have Alert. Jesus instructs us to remain alert. Look for the signs that the kingdom of God is coming, on earth as it is in heaven.
- We have Attitude. In the face of adversity and despair, Jesus instructs us to choose hope.
- Our final A is Anticipation.

We wait for Christ's advent with an attitude of hope. But this waiting isn't passive. This is an active kind of waiting.

The psalmist writes:

I wait for the LORD;

my soul does wait, and in His word I put my hope.

My soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen wait for the morning,

more than watchmen wait for the morning. (Psalm 130:5-6)

Sentries watch with anticipation. They're vigilant in scanning the surroundings. They listen for small noises. They search for movement. The night watch is especially perilous and challenging. The psalmist uses the familiar metaphor for how he watches actively for the Lord's presence in this world. We are now in December, and we approach the winter solstice. Our days are as short as can be. But this Sunday, we light the first candle on our Advent wreath. Next Sunday we will light two, and so on until Christmas. On Christmas we will light the Christ Candle. And there we celebrate the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. For now we wait for the light. But we do so actively, with anticipation.

I remember many years ago, when I was working in IT. I was in the USA. I had left my hotel in Arizona. It was summer, and hot, and so I left very early, while it was still dark. I headed east through New Mexico. And after a while, it seemed that something was changing. It was nearly imperceptible, but there was an ever-nuanced greying in the east. It was so subtle I wasn't even sure I was seeing anything. Is that the morning dawn? Is day upon us? Is our night nearly over? I kept driving east. And in about five minutes, yes, it did seem like there was a growing light. It was, indeed, the beginning of the day.

This Advent season – and always – may we keep alert as we wait in the word of the Lord, more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Amen.