

Becoming an Advent People  
Advent 3A 2016  
Apostles Anglican  
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We are watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord.

“Advent is really the great freedom of God.” Alfred Delp proclaimed these words in an Advent sermon in 1942 in the middle of Nazi Germany. His sermon of hope was an act of resistance against the darkness of the age. He continued, “May man recognize this freedom of God in God’s free decision to come to mankind—as well as the freedom of God in His choice of the ways and means in which He wants to meet us. God can stand before mankind in a burning thorn bush or in the miracle of His Son...He can be more motherly than a mother, or He can stand as the God of all destinies....”

Today Delp challenges us all to look with expectancy for the coming of the Lord—no matter where we are. He sings out,

“Advent means remembering the freedom of God and then abandoning ourselves to the divine unpredictability.” – Alfred Delp<sup>1</sup>

We are watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord. He is free to come when and how He chooses. As we watch and wait, we remember John the Baptist. He grew up with the singular focus of watching and waiting for the Lord. We first encounter his ministry in the wilderness where he is calling for an entire generation to watch and wait with him for the coming of the Lord. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” As John speaks, the Kingdom of Heaven walks up.

The long-awaited King stands before him. John the Baptist is ready to kneel, to take off his sandals, to submit to this King of Glory, but Jesus comes to be baptized. John hesitates. If possible, he would prevent him, John replies, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”<sup>2</sup>

Our God will God as our God will come.

Shortly thereafter, John is hidden from our eyes. He is taken away to prison. The world cannot see in and he cannot see out. The greatest prophet in the history of Israel must trust the eyes and ears of his disciples to see and hear for him. He sends them to Jesus with the central question of John’s existence, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

Jesus responds in the words that will fill John with hope, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and

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<sup>1</sup> Delp, Alfred (2010-06-21). *Advent Of The Heart* (Kindle Location 780). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Mt 3:14.

the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus lists the very actions of the Messiah for whom John awaits. Though our God is free to come when and how He will come, His character never changes. He is completely faithful and trustworthy. As the psalmist sings,

“The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
<sup>8</sup> the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the Lord loves the righteous.”<sup>4</sup>

“His lovingkindness endures forever.” When the King comes, He is physically restoring the broken, giving sight to the blind, and opening the ears of the deaf. He is also opening the way that will heal and restore the very image of God in man.

Our God will come as our God will come and when He does, He will make all things new. That which sin and rebellion have devastated will be transformed, brought back to life, restored to glory.

I am thinking of Isaiah’s prophecy today. We read from chapter 35 when Isaiah sings of the coming restoration, but first he sings of the coming devastation. In chapter 34, he sees the whole world reeling under the sin of humankind, and the Lord appearing as judge, bringing devastation to all monuments of human selfishness and rebellion. Chapter 34 envision a devastated wilderness:

<sup>8</sup> For the Lord has a day of vengeance,  
a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.  
<sup>9</sup> And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch,  
and her soil into sulfur;  
her land shall become burning pitch.  
<sup>10</sup> Night and day it shall not be quenched;  
its smoke shall go up forever.  
From generation to generation it shall lie waste;  
none shall pass through it forever and ever.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the passage, the whole world is a yawning wilderness, a barren land. In an odd juxtaposition, Isaiah 35 inverts the vision of 34. As he looks over the devastation and emptiness, he sees the hand of God’s mercy even in the midst of the devastation of human sin and evil.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;  
<sup>2</sup> it shall blossom abundantly

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Mt 11:4–6.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ps 146:7–8.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Is 34:8–10.

and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.<sup>6</sup>

Isaiah sees our Lord coming to those with anxious hearts and feeble knees, those trembling before the destruction. He sees our Lord coming to save us.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
<sup>6</sup> then shall the lame man leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.  
For waters break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;<sup>7</sup>

Though devastation and destruction surround, Henry Longfellow reminded us, “God is not dead nor doth he sleep!” In His great mercy, He comes to redeem.

I opened with a quote from Alfred Delp. Like John the Baptist, Delp was dedicated to watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord. His formation as a priest took place against the backdrop of the rising Nazi threat in Germany. Ordained as priest in 1937, he chose the Scripture, “No one can lay another foundation than that which has already been laid: Jesus Christ,” as his motto. He served as member of the Society of Jesus when many Jesuits were imprisoned and put in concentration camps for their opposition to the regime.

In 1941, he was appointed Rector of Saint Georg Church in Munich-Bogenhausen and knew he was being observed by the Gestapo. Much like John the Baptist, he called a people to watch and wait in the midst of a dark world.

In an Advent sermon from 1941, he told his congregation, “Perhaps what we modern people need most is to be genuinely shaken, so that where life is grounded, we would feel its stability; and where life is unstable and uncertain, immoral and unprincipled, we would know that, also, and endure it. Perhaps that is the ultimate answer to the question of why God has sent us into this time, why He permits this whirlwind to go over the earth, and why He holds us in such a state of chaos and in hopelessness and in darkness—and why there is no end in sight. It is because we have stood here on the earth with a totally false and inauthentic sense of security.”<sup>8</sup>

He goes on to suggest that when God allows a great shaking it is to shake us awake and shake away all our false hopes. We must reencounter afresh the Holy God of Israel in the person of Jesus Christ. He alone is our one foundation; He alone is our hope and peace. Every other form of security can and will be shaken. As I reread his sermons this year, I feel as though I am hearing afresh the words of John the Baptist with his laser focus on the coming King, telling me

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<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Is 35:1–2.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Is 35:5–6.

<sup>8</sup> Delp, Alfred (2010-06-21). *Advent Of The Heart* (Kindle Locations 394-398). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

to “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Let go of every thought and every action that is odds with the kingdom of God.

Turn to the Lord in word and deed. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Delp was arrested in 1944 for participating in the Kreisau Circle: this was a group of men and women who realized that Hitler was threatening the very survival of Germany. They loved their nation but hated the destruction Hitler had caused. The group was made up of philosophers, economists, clergy, diplomats, and more. They were thinking about how to rebuild a Christian Germany after the horror of Hitler. In the darkest days of the Nazi empire, they were looking forward in hope and planning how to respond at the appropriate time.

Some members of the group also participated in a plot to kill Hitler alongside people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Though Delp had nothing to do with this plot, he was wrongly implicated and arrested in summer of 1944. The intensity of his watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord only increased. Some of his letters got out from prison and he exhorted his people to light the Advent candles as a real symbol of what must happen in Advent: the light overcoming darkness.

While being held at Tegel prison, he remained in shackles all day, every day, and light shined into his room 24 hours a day. He used these conditions to write and focus his heart on the coming of the Lord. When Delp looked out from his prison cell, he could see ruined world of Isaiah 34 all around him. The devastation of human sin and rebellion. A world crumbling into ruins. And yet, like Isaiah, he could see the promise of God beneath the threat of evil.

His response? Now more than ever the people of God must focus on the joy of the Lord. He writes, “No joy is central to our existence... How should we live so that we are capable—or can become capable—of true joy? This question should occupy us more today than it has in the past. Man should take joy as seriously as he takes himself. And he should believe in himself, believe in his heart and in his Lord God, even through darkness and distress—that he is created for joy. This really means that we are created for a fulfilled life that knows its meaning and is certain of its capabilities. Such a life knows it is on the right path to perfection and allied with the angels and powers of God. We are created for a life that knows itself to be blessed, sent, and touched at its deepest center by God Himself.”<sup>9</sup>

This vision of hope and joy only increased as he grew closer to death. While waiting for his coming execution, he wrote, “More, and on a deeper level than before, we really know this time that all of life is Advent”<sup>10</sup> All of life is Advent waiting and watching for the Lord who comes as He will come.

At one point in prison he wrote, “It is the time of sowing, not of harvesting. God is sowing; one day He will harvest again. I will try to do one thing. I will try at least to be a fruitful and healthy seed, falling into the soil. And into the Lord God’s hand.”<sup>11</sup> Even as the Allies were conquering

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<sup>9</sup> Delp, Alfred (2010-06-21). *Advent Of The Heart* (Kindle Locations 1017-1023). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Delp, Alfred (2010-06-21). *Advent Of The Heart* (Kindle Locations 109-110). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Delp, Alfred (2010-06-21). *Advent Of The Heart* (Kindle Locations 188-189). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

Germany in the final days of the war, Alfred Delp was executed by the Nazis. A seed planted in the ground.

He learned how to behold the faithfulness of God in the midst of a world gone wrong. He lived as an Advent man, watching and waiting. What does it mean to watch and wait for the coming of the Lord?

For Delp, Advent watching meant looking to Jesus Christ as the very foundation of his faith. Advent watching meant living with expectancy that God is coming into the midst of the darkness that smothered his world. Advent watching meant taking the joy of the Lord seriously and living as a man created for joy in the Lord even as he waited for death. Advent watching meant obeying the call of God in the moment that he was living and being obedient even unto death.

Today, we are waiting in times of blessedness and unblessedness, in times of joy but also in times of sorrow, in times of clarity but so often in times of confusion. We are watching and waiting for the God who will come as He will come.

When we look at some of the issues of our world, we can see images of Isaiah 34. We can see human devastation and destruction caused by wicked people. If we are truly honest, we can also see the devastation within our hearts. We can see doubt, discouragement, anger, lust, complaint, bitterness and other darkneses come out of our heart and minds. Now is the time to turn afresh to the Lord who has come, will come and is coming even now. We turn afresh and cry out for mercy. Sometimes Advent waiting is characterized by facing our own need for mercy and grace. He can transform our hearts and our world to the vision of Isaiah 35.

As a people created to watch and wait for the Lord, we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy before him endured the cross. Even as the Father raised up Jesus from the dead, He will give life to our mortal bodies and we ourselves will become living examples of His hope, His peace, His joy, His love.

Like Isaiah, like John the Baptist, like Alfred Delp, we are called to be an Advent people. A people growing up into unshakeable trust in the absolute faithfulness of God. A people who live with expectancy of God's coming even as we face the struggles and questions in our world. As Advent people, we realize the joy of the Lord is not an option but the very reality of our existence. Rejoice in the Lord always. Rejoice for the Lord is near. We enter into the joy of the Lord and bring his hope and joy wherever we go, shining the light of God's love into all the dark places of our world.

Thank God for the cloud of witnesses who lived out their faith in Jesus Christ in the midst of dark and troubling times. Today is our day. Our day to trust in God's absolute lovingkindness as revealed Christ and to go out in His joy, revealing His hope to a world in desperate need of redemption.