Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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I made my first Communion when I was 8. I had waited long for it, was dressed up in a dress, veil and shoes, all of them white. I was ready for the big moment. Then, Msgr. Higgins gave the homily. He admired how we were

dressed, "Little princes and princesses," and told us that it was a great day.

Then he said something I have never forgotten. He said, "Today is the least important time you will ever receive Communion. Every time after this will build on it and be fuller of grace."

His homily also works as an Advent message that tells us: "The unknown future will bring more than we can imagine. Just keep getting readier!" That sets us off on a journey of hopeful anticipation.

First Sunday of Advent

Dec. 3, 2023

Isaiah 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7
Psalm 80
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:33-37

As we begin Advent, we might recall some of our most memorable experiences of anticipation. Was it waiting for the birth of a child or the day of the wedding? Perhaps something seemingly much more mundane like the

end of the school year, the moment when your date was to pick you up or meet you at the restaurant.

Waiting reminds us that, like it or not, we don’t control the universe.

At the same time, we won’t discover the new unless we are open to it. Advent anticipation adds open-ended hope to all our anticipation. We keep growing, therefore the future is both unpredictable and promising.

Sometimes, it seems that Advent is designed to be confusing. Theologians call it a time of "already and not yet." Today's Gospel captures that dilemma perfectly. Jesus says, "Be on the lookout!" For what? For the coming of something you can't predict, something that will take you by surprise at the least expected moment!

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Jesus consistently avoided the trap of giving details about the end times.(They were — and still are — in an unpredictable process of becoming.) Nevertheless, he offered somber hints when he described the unpredictable time to come for him.

He said it would come, "in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning." Those were precisely the hours leading up to his passion. Jesus was arrested while praying in the evening. His interrogation by the religious leaders took place after that, presumably around midnight. Cockcrow was the moment for Peter to deny knowing him. In the morning, the Sanhedrin handed him over to Pilate.

Those were the moments for which he was watching. The disciples remembered this clearly because those worst of times blossomed into the Resurrection. For what are we supposed to be watching? Although Isaiah asks God to rend the heavens, he describes God much more gently as our father, the potter, our redeemer forever.

Today's Psalm speaks of God the shepherd who watches over the tender vine. This leads us to sing, "Lord make us turn to you, show us your face and we shall be saved." We realize that just knowing our God is all we need because, as Paul said, God is faithful and calls us and continually makes us capable of

communion with the Son. When we are growing, that communion also keeps growing.

The Jesuit mystic Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1957), talked about how to move in this continual journey of becoming more. He wrote:

> Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
>
> We are quite naturally

impatient in everything to

reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip
the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being

on the way to something

unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all

progress that it is made by

passing through some stages

of instability — and that it

may take a very long time.

Sometimes we are tempted to look to the past as an ideal age: "If only I had lived in the time of Abraham or Jesus, or the days of the Latin Mass or ... [fill in the blank]." That's not what Jesus did. He knew the treasures of his tradition, he cherished them, but he knew that time moves in only one direction, therefore what is to come, hard as it might seem to be, promises to be more than this or any moment of the past.

Our season of Advent — this year the shortest possible because Christmas falls on a Monday — invites us into hopeful anticipation. While we wait "for the revelation of our Lord," we will need to learn to appreciate Jesus' hours of passion and Teilhard's disturbing "stages of instability." We can appreciate them as hope-soaked promises in a process of growing in grace.

Advent is the time to anticipate what we cannot yet see, and to trust that it will come. Each day's grace will build on the last.