And the voice said, “Be still...and know that I am God.” Amen.

“Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Right. Sure they will. I will admit to all of you on this first day of the new liturgical year that I come from a long line of sardonic thinkers. We are so good at it that we have elevated skepticism to an art form. In fact, one of the rites of passages for youth in our family is to be able to identify whether one of us is being cynical or sarcastic. It is not surprising therefore, that when I hear today’s first reading from Isaiah, I cannot help but roll my eyes. 3000 years later, and here we are, still maiming and killing one another over religion, still attempting to bring peace to people by going to war with them. Just a cursory listen to the news this past week reveals to us the continued war-torn devastation occurring in Syria, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Burma, North Korea, Somalia, and on and on and on. The entire region where Isaiah wrote those words is the ultimate example, where peace is a word that has become downright laughable. It is also so much worse than anything Isaiah ever experienced, because we are now so much better at destroying one another. And it is not just the millions of people who have been killed in all of these wars, but it is the devastating effect it has had on the survivors who have been assaulted and abused in every way. Last Sunday on 60 Minutes, some of you may have seen the report on U.S. soldiers who continue to suffer from such profound PTSD, they cannot live life at all. Our own Sudanese community here is thankfully out of the line of fire, but they too suffer from these debilitating symptoms. Not only have we not given a thought to beating our swords into plowshares, but instead we continue
to create bigger and better swords and spears, so that we can destroy each other so much more effectively.

When, we want to know, is all this going to stop? When are we going to come to our senses? When is God going to break into the mess that we have created and say enough already? When is this kingdom of God that we have been spouting off about for so long actually going to happen? When are Isaiah’s words going to really happen?

Instead of getting an answer, what do we hear in today’s Gospel? “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son.”

Welcome, beloved, to Advent. The season of no answers. The season when we are told to sit here and wait. The season when... absolutely nothing happens. Our church year starts not with a great revelation or an answer to our problems. It offers no information about when everything is going to get better. What it offers us is...nothing.

Advent tells us that we do not know when peace will come to the world. We do not know when we will feel like Christ is back in our lives. We do not when, or if, our loved one is going to ever get better. We do not know when, or if, our own losses will be healed and if we will ever stop feeling the pain of them.

In the midst of all of our pondering about the state of our lives and the world, Advent tells us to stop already, to stop acting like the kid in the car who wants to know every 15 seconds when you are going to arrive. Be still and know that you are not in control. Be still and know that you are not God.

Waiting in emptiness is of course, unacceptable in today’s world. We need answers. We need action. If what we are waiting for is not happening at that moment, we need to make it happen, or we need to at least make something else happen. That
has never been more true than in our post-modern world, where not only do we have to have something going on constantly, but we must have multiple things occurring around us all the time. If we are to function at an acceptable level in today’s world, we must be able to simultaneously have a conversation with someone, respond to our email, answer our texts, and eat all at the same time. Even in relaxation mode, we must do multiple things at once. We can’t just watch TV, but we have to have scrolls at the bottom of the screen to hold our interest in case we get bored with the main image. Thank God that some service providers have also now invented the split screen, so we can watch eight different programs at once. While all this is happening, we need to be exercising simultaneously or reading a book. Multi-tasking is not a fad or some passing fancy. It is and will remain an essential way of life in our future. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with multi-tasking. We accomplish more. It keeps us sharp.

But when we have to be plugged into something before we can take a contemplative hike in the desert, something is wrong. Americans have actually become afraid to experience any vacuum or period of quiet in our lives.

That is why Advent is totally disregarded in our culture today. A season of waiting, a season where we are given no answers and asked to live in ambiguity and nothingness makes no sense to anyone. So everybody skips it, multi-tasking their way from Halloween to Christmas, with only the briefest stop this week for Thanksgiving. The day after I left CREDO, I made the terrible mistake of walking into a department store. There I was assaulted by the mellifluous tones of Bing Crosby and Silver Bells. It was November freakin’ 13! And it is not just our can’t wait for anything culture that does this. The church is just as bad. One of our parishioners took some stuff to another
church last week, and when she arrived, the folks there asked her, what’s wrong with you people at Grace St. Paul’s? How come you are not celebrating Christmas?

For all these reasons, Advent may now be the most important liturgical season of the year. There is nothing left in our culture to offer a counter-balance to a distracted world that can no longer wait for anything. As strange as it sounds, Advent has become a profoundly counter-cultural act, one we can no longer afford to skip.

One of the most misunderstood things about religion is that it is all about one revelation after another, one Epiphany on top of another. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, what religion should teach us is how to get through the majority of our lives when we do not feel God’s presence at all. Advent reminds us that waiting and watching through the nothing is actually what makes it possible for us to experience the divine in our own lives.

One of the great examples of this is portrayed in a movie that was released on Friday. In *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, we are reminded of Nelson Mandela’s 27 years of Advent in prison. There was no good reason for him to be there. But instead of wasting that time, he used it to change himself from the inside out. “When I walked out of prison,” he says, I knew my mission was to liberate the oppressor and the oppressed.” And that is exactly what he did.

How can WE do it though? Even if we can see the value in the experience of waiting, how can we possibly be Advent people in a world that cannot wait for a traffic light to change, that can’t help but play Christmas music in November?

As Christians, we also have little to draw from in learning what it takes to properly experience Advent. We are not any better at waiting than the rest of the culture. This is
particularly obvious in the ways we have historically interpreted our Advent biblical readings. For centuries, Christians have read today’s apocalyptic Gospel and interpreted it as describing the imminent end of the world. Even though Jesus himself discounts the description contained in the Gospel, telling us at both the beginning and the end of it that no one knows when this is going to happen, we don’t want to hear that. We would rather forget what Jesus tells us and go instead with the idea that it is happening tomorrow. In every generation for 2000 years we have done this. Why do we not listen to Jesus? Because we just can’t wait. We want to believe that the world is ending next week because we can’t wait for anything.

So whether it is our multi-tasking post modern culture or our deep religious tradition, it seems that we are doomed. It seems that we have no way to learn how to truly be Advent people. But before we give up, let us go back, way back. Let us return to the time before our 2000 years of religious tradition to our more ancient roots.

The best way I know to connect you to this part of our primordial tradition, is to introduce you to someone. His name was George Harris. He was the sales manager for a company that I worked for many, many moons ago. George was one of those folks that all of us experience. He taught me life lessons I will never forget.

Like the time we went on our first road trip together. I will never forget that first night, when he took the naive, green kid that I was under his wing, as we went out to dinner. “Oh, you are going to love this place Steve. The chef here is a close friend of mine and he is just the best. This evening and this meal are going to change your life.” At first I thought George was metaphorically exaggerating, but he was not kidding one bit. He expected that evening to change me....and it did.
So there I was, trying my best to look like I knew what I was doing as I perused the menu, when suddenly George grabbed the thing out of my hands. “Keplinger, what are you doing? Have I not taught you anything?” Before I could respond, he had deftly dropped my menu, picked up another and placed it into my hands. “George,” I said, “What am I supposed to do with this? It’s the dessert menu.” “Of course it is,” he said. The master continued. “Steve, plan your meal properly. How can you possibly choose your main course, if you do not know what you are going to have for dessert?” Always, Steve, always choose dessert first. Then you plan your entire meal around it. Otherwise, you are going to miss the best thing and spoil your entire culinary experience.”

Lesson number one. Be patient. Think ahead and wait. Only by deciding how to climax your meal could you possibly know how, or even if, to order a main course. Every meal George ate was carefully planned around what was to come.

One of the problems restaurants have today is that there are very few George Harris’ out there. Dessert rolls around and everyone says, oh no, I’m too full. This was a tragic error in George’s mind. “People,” he used to say, “need to learn how to wait. Otherwise, the best part is ruined.” George Harris understood the point of Advent better than anyone I’ve ever known.

So why could George do this when I failed so miserably at it? Because George was Jewish. His DNA was programmed for making the best out of waiting. As a people who have spent their entire existence waiting, they understand how to live in hope. Like many Jewish holidays, that is a major part of the festival of Hanukkah that they are celebrating right now. Not the immediate gratification of a single day of Christmas, but
an eight day celebration of waiting. If you want to learn how to truly experience the
magic of Advent, if you want to learn how to wait for God in those times of your life when
God seems to have abandoned you, if you want to learn how to wait in hope for Christ
to come, if you want to turn Christmas back into a 12 day event, I urge all of you to
remember the lesson from my friend George. Choose dessert first and then wait for it
with breathless anticipation. The only way to experience the power of Advent so that we
can once again be with God is to...think like a Jew. Learning to wait like a Jew gets us
through the pain of separation and loneliness and also allows us to hear Isaiah’s vision
of a world without war not as a cynic, but as a vision of the kingdom of God that truly
begins with the birth of Jesus.

Ironic, isn’t it? The only way we are going to truly immerse ourselves into the
Christian season of Advent is to learn from someone who has never experienced the
season we begin today. Jews, of course, don’t need a season of Advent, because their
whole lives are Advent. That’s why all of us need to become Jews once again at this
time of year.

So let us all be counter-cultural. Let’s be Jews as we prepare for the most
important Christian time of the year. Let’s buck everything that we see happening
around us in the world. Yes, of course, we want Christmas, we long for the birth of
Emmanuel, we long for the time when something happens, and we can feel God’s
presence. Of course we want the wars to end and our own pain to begin healing.

But if we do not prepare for God by waiting, we are going to miss it all. So let us
immerse ourselves not just in Advent but also Hannukah and our Jewishness. I’ve got
just the thing to help...
Be patient beloved, think like a Jew, and let this Advent just happen. Order
dessert first and experience the greatest meal you have ever tasted, followed by the
dessert of Christmas, exploding with the most delightful sensation of Christ with us that
we have ever imagined. Happy Advent to all of you and Happy, happy Hanukkah.
Amen.