

**First Sunday of Advent – Cycle B**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – December 3, 2017**  
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In the wake of the Hunger Games books and movies, I am told that more teens are now interested in archery. A few years ago, all little boys – and a good number of little girls – wanted to study dinosaurs. Back in the 1950s, Davy Crockett and coon-skin caps had children wanting to blaze a trail. All of us, it seems, are products of our times. My generation was fascinated by space. We were the children of the “moon race” who knew all there was to know about the Saturn V rocket, the lunar module, and the dangers of re-entry. The bedroom I shared with my little brother had drapes and bedspreads that featured astronauts. When I was about 9, I took a summer course on astronomy and star-charting at the planetarium at the Pink Palace. I looked forward to our trips to my grandparents’ cabin at the lake – not because I especially wanted to fish. No, I liked leaving the lights of the city so I could spend the evening hours gazing at the stars, playing with a telescope, and imagining the worlds out there waiting to be explored. Most of us, I think, longed to be a part of the adventure. In the sixties, what intrigued us about space, I suggest, is not what we knew, but what we did not know. All of us – from politicians to NASA scientists to the average kid at a cabin – could gaze at the vastness of space and wonder.

For Catholics, Advent is our season of night, our season of wonder. Our vestments are deep violet – the color of the sky at night. It is our time to remember that though we have already encountered Christ, we still have much to learn about the world, about ourselves, and especially about our God. It is a time for silent star-gazing and for self-evaluation; a time not to focus on the answers but to dwell in the questions. In Advent, we divert our eyes ever so briefly from the bright light of Christ and instead remember that we were once – and in many ways still are – the people who walk in darkness who continue to long for Bethlehem’s star.

Advent is not an easy season to live. Everywhere we turn these days, people are already celebrating Christmas and we find it so tempting to join in. We want to focus on the joy of the season because to do so means that we do not have to take the time to examine our lives, or examine our relationship with God. We would much rather spend countless hours shopping and decorating and preparing our homes for festive celebrations than take the time to quietly prepare our hearts to receive our Savior. We would rather dwell in the artificial light of tinsel and sparkling ornaments than risk gazing at the stars in the darkness we have grown to fear. That’s what Jesus wants us to do, isn’t it?

Look at our gospel today. Jesus reminds us to be watchful, to be alert, for we do not know the day or the hour when the Lord will come. Nonsense, we say, everyone knows when Christmas will come and that we have but 21/20 shopping days left. Why not celebrate now? We know that Jesus was born over 2000 years ago. Why delay the celebration? Well, we embrace this season of Advent, this season of watching and waiting, because it was Jesus himself who told us to be watchful, to be alert. Why? Had he forgotten who he was? Was he confused about his birthday? No, Jesus calls us to be watchful because there is value in the watching. He invites us into the night because the stars of his firmament, the wonders of his universe are not visible in the daylight. Fully aware of the brightness of his presence, Jesus calls us into the darkness so that we might see where the tiny flicker of his star meets what could be the brightness of our soul. You see, Jesus knew that we could not appreciate the splendor of his coming unless we lived for a time with the longing for his presence. We could not appreciate the richness of his banquet unless we spent some time hungering for bread. We could not appreciate the power of his love and forgiveness unless we understood the depth of our sin.

Advent is the time when the Church gives voice to this call of Christ, when we remember that he who came as a little child will come again in glory. When we ignore Advent, we miss the opportunities that the season lays before us. When we look only at the Son, we are incapable of seeing the constellations of our sinfulness, the meteor showers of our selfishness and greed, and the bright promise of that distant star. When we embrace Advent, when we remember to be watchful and alert, then the manger is so much more dazzling, the joy is so much more hopeful, and the love so much more real. So in our abbreviated Advent this year, in the midst of the hectic pace of the social whirl and the commercial Christmas season, may we set aside some time each day to be quiet before the Lord, to close our eyes and reflect upon his love, to open our hearts to receive him anew. Let us begin this season of night, ever watchful, ever alert, unafraid of the darkness, confident of his love, and always excited by the wonder and the adventure.