

“It’s time” can be a *difficult* phrase to hear.

“It’s time” is the line I use to signal to families as they wait in our building’s office wing that it’s time to begin their loved one’s funeral.

“It’s time” is what the doctor says to signal the start of that procedure you’re nervous about, what the boss says upon convincing you to retire. “It’s time”: What the hospice nurse said to me and Herb Peterson’s family as he began his transition this week from this life to the next.

But “It’s time” can also be a *joyful* phrase! “It’s time” is also what I say to grooms and brides as they wait in the same room in our church before their wedding.

“It’s time” is what parents say to kids excited for a trip or birthday party, or what they say when the children are somewhere they *don’t* want to be and are ready to go home.

“It’s time”: Sometimes it brings up fear, dissipation, and worry, as the Gospel reading puts it. Sometimes it brings up excitement and joy, love and strength in our hearts, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians.

Advent is the time before "It's time." Advent is the church’s season of sitting in those precarious moments before it’s actually, properly time. Advent is the space just before the big event, a four-week journey when you sit with all your uncertainties and your fears and it feels like the longed-for salvation just will

never come, and so here we are dwelling with all the paradox and mixed emotions this *almost*-time phase brings.

In our readings this time of year, we are surrounded by the signs that it's *almost* time. That it's almost time for the arrival of Christ: both as a glorified prince at the end of the age and as an infant in the incarnation. Today, our Gospel lesson starts by imagining some end times, the consummation of creation, the full-blown Son of Man coming in a cloud, and in four weeks they finish with the birth of a baby, the delivery of the boy child of Mary. Advent is an arrival that stretches into the future: the promise of God coming to live among us in flesh fulfilled, and the promise of God coming to complete the project still left open.

Advent is a way of dwelling at the precipice of the phrase "*It's time*" and all of its paradoxes. It's time for some things to end. It's time for other things to begin. It's time for darkness, and it's time for light. It's time now and it's time later. It's a time that brings about fear and a time that anticipates joy. A time that recognizes chaos and a time that moves toward hope.

It's quite mysterious. Don't worry if you don't get it. Advent is, after all, a mysterious season that we must experience. It tells us to prepare, but there really isn't any way to prepare *fully* for the moment when "it's time." No book prepares you for parenthood. No funeral preplanning makes you ready to bury your lifelong companion. The signs help us understand when it's time for the big motion, when the time of waiting is over, even if they don't exactly prepare us for what will happen next.

The line between the time-already-waited and the event-not-yet-happened is actually much finer than we suppose; they do indeed smash right into each other.

Perhaps that's why Jesus calls upon the fig tree to explain this strange confluence of beginning and end, now and later. Fig trees keep their own time, you see, compared to other trees. Fig trees still lie dormant as spring begins. Bulbs bloom, green grass shoots up, and a variety of trees leaf out, but the fig tree does nothing. Fig trees wait. They wait until it's time. Until the last minute, it seems, and then when they do leaf out, their leaves get *big* and *huge* and do it *fast*. "It's time!" their abundant leaves and delicious fruit blossoms shout. They were delayed; it was a long wait, but now, it's happening fast. In a blink, it's time.

Mentioned in this list of signs—signs of distress and confusion, fear and glory—the fig tree reminds us that *time is not exactly what we think it is*. As we live in the not-yet-but-almost of time, craning our necks to see the signs, we might think nothing is ever going to happen, that we will never get to the "It's-time" moment, no matter how badly we want it. But the fig tree upends our expectations of time.

The fig tree disregards the cycle of all other trees. And God works like that fig tree. What seems dormant will quickly bear fruit; and God acts so too. The fig tree reminds us that when it comes to God, we're not working on our time frame. God works on God's own time, which is a convergence, a merging of time.

A time that is now and later. A time that is drawing near and still coming. A time that knows fear and despair and a time full of joy and hope.

So what are we to *do* during this time? How do we *live* in this contorted moment? Fortunately, Jesus leaves us with instructions: Wait at the ready. Stand up. Raise our heads. Because our redemption is drawing near, and it is time. Time to be alert. And time to pray. Pray earnestly, as Saint Paul instructed the Thessalonians. Thank God for all the joy of getting to bide the time in *this* community. Thank God for the peace of getting to mourn that it's time with *this* group of believers. Thank God for the hope of celebrating that it's time with *this* assembly.

And we are to anticipate the good that is yet to unfold: The Son of Man coming in a cloud. The Son of God being born in a manger. The Lord abounding in love for us and us abounding in love for one another.

Indeed, on this first Sunday of Advent, "It's time." Time to be time. For it will be time at Christmas. It will be time one day. Because God is in charge of time for all eternity. And it is always time for God to come.

AMEN.