

This transcript was developed using an AI-based speech to text generator. We apologize for any typos or other errors.

.

“Waiting in the Dark” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (12/03/2023, The First Sunday of Advent)

.

Let us pray. Almighty God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Like many of you, I never grew up celebrating events. I had absolutely no idea what this season of the church year was until about 20 years ago when I visited an Episcopal church for the first time. And over the years, it's become one of my favorite seasons of the church year. Nevertheless, I will confess, I am still trying to figure advent out.

And so this morning, I'd like to turn to one of our best honorary Episcopalians, Taylor Swift, to help me out. I thought it would be useful to figure out which liturgical seasons correspond to which Taylor Swift albums. Some of them are obvious. Pentecost is red.

Thank you. I feel like ordinary time is 1989. Epiphany is midnight, you know, it's the light, right? Okay. Holy week is reputation. Easter tide is lover.

Lent to speak now.

If I've already lost you, I apologize. But the clearest one to me is that folklore is advent. Brooding, mysterious, introspective feeling like a cabin in the woods in the middle of a foggy winter morning. A voice of exile and wandering. Searching for meaning among the fragments of life brought about by loss, grief, and regrets. That album, folklore, was written and recorded in the middle of the quarantines of early 2020. And it reflects that sense of confusion, grief, and loss while also having an intense focus on emotional

development that resonated, I think, with a lot of people in that time. And now, our lives are often about many things all at the same time. I think about this often, especially as I scroll social media, which can have this incredible whiplash effect, moving us within seconds from a friend's recipe for cornbread dressing to news of someone's death, to pictures of a kid graduating from high school that it seems like we just held as a baby to a video of a war somewhere far off. And so with the season of Advent like folklore does best, I think, is to focus our attention on one thing, which is waiting in the darkness for salvation. And I know my friends that that doesn't sell nearly as well as a lighted Christmas tree, but I want to share with you why I think it's important. Why a song like Johnny caches the man comes around is probably our best modern Advent hymn with lyrics like Till Armageddon, No Salam, No Shalom. Then the father hen will call his chickens home. The wise man will bow down before the throne, and at his feet, they'll cast their golden crowns when the man comes around. Waiting in the darkness for salvation. I think we've all been deeply affected by the scenes of joyous reunions on full display in the news media over the past week, whether it is Israeli young people, people far far too young, being reunited with their families, having been released from captivity as hostages, or whether it is Palestinian young people, again far too young, being reunited with their families, having been released from captivity as prisoners. The sheer joy of these reunions is in many cases too raw, too intense, too much for us to watch, and so for myself I often have to look away. There's also this knowledge that the joy of this reunion will quickly turn to the painful link-threat rebuilding of the psyche of a person who has been a captor or imprisoned. The possibility that the trauma of separation from their family and the conditions of their captivity may run so deep that full wholeness and health may still lie a very long way off, years and years of repair on the horizon. Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence as when fire

kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence. This powerful cry from the prophet Isaiah rings in our ear as we see the tragedies of the world unfold before our eyes. Maybe it gives us some comfort to realize that these tragedies are not new? They are never new, but we are given a more intimate and immediate view of them than ever before through the connection's technology, if that can even be considered a gift, not a curse. What does it mean to wait in darkness for salvation? What does it mean to wait on the Lord? Advent is a time of crying out in the wilderness, crying out in the darkness, crying out in the pain and suffering of this world. Lord Jesus, come quickly. What does it mean to wait for a loved one in captivity? The most difficult thing about these stories for me is where my imagination goes. What does it mean to be separated from someone you love and to cry out for their return? What does it mean to be reunited with them, to embrace them, and yet maybe not even to recognize them at first because of the changes right upon them in their captivity? What does it mean to wait in the darkness for salvation? The church asks us to enter this season of Advent, I believe, to have us contemplate this kind of longing and pain and joy, to give voice to our cries of frustration and anger at the state of the world and the state of our own lives, to allow us to say to God, oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down. The image is of someone ripping their garment in terror and anguish. The same way that a mother would do when her child is taken captive, the same way that Isaiah's own people had been taken captive. The church allows us in this season of Advent to cry out, to demand, to ask God, to rend God's garment, to take on our human nature, to enter into our world of sorrow and pain and longing, to know what it means to be separated from someone we love, to understand us, to empathize with our plight, to be among us, with us, one of us, for God to learn what it is to wait. The elements of the Christmas story will be evident soon enough. They are already, of course, everywhere around us, but the church itself waits and waits to tell this story. Advent is our time of gestation. When we, like Mary, begin to contemplate the joy, the wonder, the mystery, and even the

unsettling that the Christ child will bring into the world. Because God will rend God's garment and come down among us, He will suffer like us, He will rejoice like us, He will come into the world with the love of His family but also terribly vulnerable as an infant and as one in danger, fleeing the rulers and the powers of His age. They will eventually catch up with Him, but not before He has thrown Himself fully into our condition, forever cementing the intimacy of our relationship with God through forgiveness, sacrifice, healing, comfort, and liberation. There is this vulnerability in our scriptures for today that can be almost frightening, as frightening as the vulnerability of watching a child who has been in captivity be reunited with their parent. Remember that this word vulnerability comes from a word that means wound. There is fear in this level of vulnerability, fear that either we will become wounded or that our wounds will be on display. It can be really scary to open ourselves up to another person, because vulnerability invites, unfortunately, and often someone to use that information to wound us at a most critical time. We have all known this pain of opening ourselves up to someone who hurts us, and we have at times been the person who has used someone else's vulnerability against them. We pray every week in the collect for purity to the God from whom no secrets are hidden. We pray that God would cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for this one desire, for this one reason that we would perfectly love God. And when you hear that word perfectly now and in the future, I don't want you to think of it as doing all the things right, checking all the boxes, never making a mistake. Perfect means finished, complete, whole, that we would holy love God, that we would completely love God, with all of our being, with both the good stuff and the bad stuff, with not only our praises and joys, but with our laments and sorrows, and yes, even our anger, oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down. In Advent, the voice of our cry, our laments, our anger reminds us that God desires above all else intimacy and closeness with humanity, and not just with humanity as some broad category, but with every single one of us, each one of us. As Rowan William says, the word is never for human beings in

general, but is always colored by a secret connection, special to each. To have a heart open to God, to have a vulnerable heart is to be honest with God, knowing that God will never use anything against us that we offer to God. It is to know that God will not break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering flax, but carries all our hurt in himself. It is to know that God takes our honesty, our tears, our prayers, and even the parts of ourselves that are hidden to ourselves, and completely loves us, holy accepts us, totally carries our pain, our inadequacy, our failure, our longing, our desire, waiting in the darkness for salvation. When Jesus tells us to keep awake, stay awake. He is not asking for the kind of fear and anxiety that gets us up at three in the morning. He is not asking for us to have the kind of hyper-vigilance that a victim of trauma does, always preparing our bodies and minds for the worst to happen. Staying awake, keeping awake for Jesus is about maintaining our vulnerability, our honesty, our conversation with God. It is about knowing that God is always listening, not to trip us up or to catch us in our mistakes, but listening with empathy, humility, kindness, and love. Keeping awake for Jesus means that we pray without ceasing, as the Apostle Paul says, which simply means being open to God, open to God's purposes for our lives, open to the Spirit's calling. As the church father origin says, resting in Christ, praying with Jesus, so that the whole of our life says, our father. The darkness of Advent is not negative. It is simply a reality that we exist all of us in the unknown. We wait in the unknown for God to break in and make all things new, to rend the heavens and come down and redeem us and the world, finally and completely from the powers of sin and death. And we do so with faith and hope, with the confidence that our honesty and vulnerability before God is honored and transformed and carried to the very throne of heaven, even as we wait in the darkness for salvation. Amen.