Good morning – please be seated.

“Good things come to those who wait.” — I’m sure most of you are familiar with this saying.

There are exactly 22 days until one of the most anticipated holidays, Christmas. I’m sure many here observe Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a Christian holiday, yes, but regardless of your religion, I want everyone here to take a moment to imagine the anticipation and preparation for this holiday. Immediately after Thanksgiving, the gears switch to Christmas. Shopping commences as early as midnight on Black Friday, B-101 erupts with Christmas songs, and every store virtually bleeds green and red. Christmas lights and trees go up without hesitation because for most, the season of Christmas has officially begun. We are in the midst of the season that precedes Christmas, otherwise known as Advent. I’m sure some of you can remember as a little kid the surprise of a new chocolate from the little window in an Advent calendar. For me, as a kid, every chocolate I received each day meant that Christmas was one day closer. One more day until shredded wrapping paper and the warmth of family and friends. However, as a young child my perception of Advent was that it was solely the time where we all prepare for Christmas, and nothing else.

Advent is derived from the Latin word “Adventus” meaning arrival. It is known as the spiritual preparation of Christmas, the birth of Jesus that is celebrated in the nativity scene. The season of Advent takes place over the four Sundays and weeks before Christmas and begins on Advent Sunday, which was actually yesterday, and ends on Christmas Eve. Around 2,000 years ago the people of Jerusalem in Israel learned of the
Christian idea the New Covenant, which is the idea of a new relationship between God and man. In Christianity, the customary analysis is that God promised to Abraham that all of his descendants would be saved. Christians consider Jesus to have fulfilled this promise. The people of Israel waited for the Messiah or “Christ figure” that was to save their lands from their oppression for quite a while. At the time they were being persecuted and tyrannized, namely by the Assyrians. The Jews, amidst the fighting, war, occupation, and the destruction of their temple maintained a sense of hope as they awaited the arrival of their Messiah, their promised savior. After centuries of waiting, wishing and anticipation, finally, for Christians the divine son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, came in human form, as Jesus.

Advent, for those who do celebrate it, is a time to be quiet. — It is a time to really think about the bigger issue of Christianity — the infinite coming into the finite — Jesus’ arrival into the world. When I came to Episcopal in 6th grade I experienced Advent. I was exposed to what the true meaning of the season was. For most of my life, my perception of Advent was blurred with my chocolate Advent calendar and the fact that one of my favorite holidays was rounding the corner. As a kid I remember attending the special services on the Sundays before Christmas during Advent but I never understood what everything “special” meant. I remember attending the special services at our Presbyterian church for Advent, but it was Middle school chapel here at Episcopal that truly introduced me to Advent — specifically to the wreath and candles that were lit every service. The candles embody the birth of God’s son and the light that came into the world from his birth. There are four candles around the wreath; they are usually purple or
blue and represent the centuries of waiting for Jesus. One candle however is pink. This pink candle symbolizes the joy of the arrival of Christ. There is one white candle in the center; this is the Christ candle that is lit either on Christmas or Christmas Eve. The shape of the wreath symbolizes God’s eternity, a circle, something that has no beginning or end, while the green of the wreath represents the hope of man in God.

In 6th Grade I can specifically remember the chapel dedicated to Advent. The chapel council gave the speech and afterward there was a question and answer session for prizes for the audience on the contents of the speech. For example they would ask what the candles symbolized or when the middle candle is lit, specific details like that. I found myself trying to memorize like the content of the speech instead of actually understanding the concepts and ideas that lied beneath it. — To understand is different than to memorize. I was only learning what was on the surface and not what lied deep within. Advent appears to be a time in which we prepare for Christmas but the connotation and deeper meaning is a time of spiritual quietness — a time of waiting and reflection to prepare for the coming of Christ.

This personal time of waiting, and spiritual preparation is blurred by all the superficial preparations for Christmas. The season of Advent differs from the season of Christmas. To many the season of Christmas is the time directly after Thanksgiving, when this is actually the season of Advent. The true “season of Christmas” does not actually start until after December 25th. It lasts for twelve days and is then followed by the season of Epiphany.
I am not speaking to you today to contradict your understanding of the season of Christmas. Rather, I am here to shed some light on the difference between the seasons of Advent and Christmas and, hopefully, make this season more relatable. The preparation for Christmas is intoxicating. It is festive and electrifying. — It brings me joy to see my house in lights and have the house smell of Christmas cookies. However, during this preparation one should maintain a personal sense of composure and stillness to reflect on the Israelites anticipation of the coming of Jesus — to have their prayers finally be answered — to be in fear and in despair but to have that pain be relieved.

I’d like to talk about some of the hymns that we sing in chapel to explain the difference between Christmas and Advent. Here is a quote from an Advent hymn: “Redeemer of the nations come, lo he comes with clouds descending.” In a Christmas hymn, we sing: “Joy to the world the Lord has come.” The Advent hymn demonstrates the waiting and anticipation of Jesus while the Christmas hymn celebrates his arrival already. The Advent hymn shows reflection while the Christmas hymn shows celebration.

Advent today is a reflection on the importance of the coming of Christ, while Christmas is the celebration of Jesus’ presence. This time of reflection and spiritual quietness is inclusive and does not just apply to Christians. One does not have to celebrate Advent in order to participate. We live hectic lives here at Episcopal thanks to tests, sports, clubs and social events —— everything is constantly in motion. Down time is precious, and I’m sure we all feel the stress of maintaining our schoolwork while
balancing it with sports and social activities. —— Advent *allows* for this down time. ——

But this time of reflection does not necessarily have to be religiously based. One can take time and space to be thoughtful, and to reflect on one’s values and experiences to move forward and live a life of purpose. —— To live the way one thinks life should be lived.

There is a time of peace that is coming for all of us, not just Christmas. Think of something that you specifically are waiting for —— something that just the thought of can overwhelm you with excitement and hopefulness.

This time to spiritually be quiet, to reflect, and to prepare, can bring a world of insight. *This* is what Advent is really about. Not the memorizing of what each candle means or the chocolate that we get out of the calendar. No, these are just symbols. If we can all take this time to wait, to anticipate, to be thoughtful, I am sure that the saying “good things come to those who wait” will prove to be true. Thank you.