

A few years ago, my wife Danika and I made our very first Christmas pudding - a delicacy known to some as a fruitcake. The recipe required us to purchase a specialized pan and a small fortune in not only dried fruit, but brandy as well.

For those of you who haven't had the pleasure of making a pudding or fruitcake, you should know that it requires a substantial amount of time and preparation. Let's just say, it is not a treat you'll make the day of a potluck. But it *is* a showstopper, as it's traditionally lit on fire before serving.

My wife and I assembled the pudding by mixing a thick glue-like dough and then dropping it into a formed pan. From there, the pudding was placed in a simmering pot of water to set before it was doused in alcohol. And then it went to rest in our cold room, where it became a source of much conversation and contemplation over the next month. Every once in a while, we'd stop in the midst of doing the dishes and ask each other, "Is it really going to work? Will we poison our families this Christmas? How will we know it's ready?"

I share this story, as we begin our advent journey together - a season of waiting and watching in hope, like my wife and I waited and watched for our first Christmas pudding. And our Gospel passage this week highlights these same themes for us as Saint Matthew writes, "no one knows when the Lord is coming." A statement that is meant to keep us ready and perhaps even a little on edge as we wait and watch for God's presence within our lives and world.

This passage certainly presents some interesting perspectives that may even call us to question what Jesus is saying through this teaching. After all, this is a scripture that has helped form the basis behind the popular *Left Behind* book series, in which "the rapture" takes place causing planes to crash and throwing the world into chaos. The "true believers" are taken up into Heaven in the blink of an eye while the "left behind" face "the great tribulation" meant to prove their faith and decide their final fate.

And if we are not careful to center this passage in the promises of God this morning – we might just be tempted to turn our imagination towards the rapture too. After all, the idea of two people working, one disappearing while the other remains is definitely unsettling. Never mind a thief coming to steal your belongings in the middle of the night, or Jesus' direction to stay awake...if you've ever had

little ones, you'll know that even one sleepless night is more than a body can take! And on top of it all, Jesus begins this passage by inviting us to remember the story of Noah and the flood. It's another disturbing tale, in which all but a few were swept away as the destructive waters of creation came to overtake the world.

However, many of us have come to reframe this story over time, choosing not to focus on its cosmic act of judgment or its ultimate destruction – but instead – we have come to lean into the promises of God we have heard through these storied waters. That God would never again destroy the entirety of creation. A promise and a sign we can see with our own eyes with each and every rainbow.

But as people of faith we also know this isn't God's only promise. Over the unfolding of scriptures, humanity and creation have strayed from God, only to be found – *again and again*. And in the midst of it all God continues to covenant and re-covenant with us - renewing God's relationship with all of creation.

It's hard to understand this kind of covenantal love. Maybe this is why John Nelson Darby, a British pastor in the 1800s, chose to piece together Matthew's gospel lesson with several other "end time" passages, giving rise to the rapture storyline so many Christians have become familiar with today.

Admittedly, it's so much easier to look at God through our human lens in this way - to say "Yep, in the end, some will be saved, and some might not." Maybe this thinking even leads us to try and save others – a well-meaning response, but one that forgets the essential promise God keeps making: God loves us. God has saved us, and God is with us no matter what.

In Advent, we prepare to celebrate the beginning of Jesus' ministry with and among us – a ministry dedicated to the transforming power of water. Jesus named and claimed us in the life-giving waters of baptism. He calmed his disciples' hearts along with the raging seas. He even spent some time with the woman at the well, meeting her needs in the midst of a judgmental community. The destructive waters of the flood became promises of renewal.

And it is in the light of these promises that we can trust that we no longer have to fear the destructive waters of this world; the waters that threaten to overtake us in the midst of our life – with waves of stress, worry, or even deep grief. For many

of us, the next 25 days will be ones filled with preparation for the busy season ahead. But for some of us, the next 25 days will be a little bit harder to take. The loss of loved ones, the lack of sunlight, financial stresses, and family conflict may all threaten to disturb the waters of our faith.

When the Gospel of Matthew was written, after the death of Christ, the author was trying to maintain hope among Christians who were waiting for Jesus' return. And in the midst of it all, throughout his gospel, Matthew encourages these same Christians to watch and wait for the coming kingdom of God. In the heart of their doubts and their fear Matthew called this community of early believers into the church to wait and watch together.

So maybe this season isn't just about managing our own waiting – but also learning to wait and watch with those we know are in need of our care and support.

Perhaps this season invites us to remind each other about the promises of God we so quickly come to forget.

Could we share the hope of advent by offering a meal, a prayer, or a kind word?

Here we return to our Christmas pudding. Despite not knowing how it would turn out, my wife and I still packed it in faith on our trip down south for the holidays. There, we offered it up to our families. It was an experiment, and it took some figuring out! We had to try and fail with different methods of warming, getting it out of the tin, and lighting it on fire. We almost ended up with more brandy than cake! But in the end, I think the process was even better than the outcome.

How perfect that sharing with others can be so *imperfect*, and how true that our mistakes and blunders are often so much more memorable! We can watch and wait with our friends or neighbors without fear this holiday season. It might involve stumbling over words, spilling on the Christmas tablecloth, or sitting in awkward silence. Maybe the important thing is that we try. Because, in Matthew's Gospel, we are not called to a passive waiting. We are called to live out an active hope through Emmanuel, "*God With Us.*"

And may this be so among us – Amen.