My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Advent is a season and a time of waiting, isn’t it? So it’s always struck me a little odd that we are given a text from Mark on this first Sunday of Advent that Christ is coming maybe right now. But let’s be honest with ourselves: if we could have Christmas right now, with all its feasts and Santas and gifts and family and snow, it would be really hard to say no, let’s wait for it. As much as we like to think that we are okay with waiting for things, we really want to know right here, right now.

Second-coming texts should not be a doctrine to which we officially subscribe just because it shows up in the ancient creeds. Here in the UCC, we recognize the historicity and importance of those faith-formation texts but we are encouraged to look at them anew, through our own reason, experience, tradition, and scripture. In case you missed it, that’s a nod to our Wesleyan partners who very much include our existence as it stands right here, right now in building up the faith which sustains us. Our faith is not one that’s theoretical, existing only in our minds. It has to be practical and actionable, too, in our hearts. It’s why our Bible is so full of metaphor, imagery, and paradox rather than fast, pat answers.

Our text gives us two things in this apocalyptic scene: it could be coming soon and very soon, or later and with longing and a very long time indeed. Jesus can’t seem to make up his mind: is the end at hand, or not?

We’re busy people, but if we knew Jesus were coming tomorrow we’d be cleaning up right quick in our lives, wouldn’t we? As if Jesus didn’t know all along who we are or what we up to. But since the time of Jesus coming might be much later, we don’t have to think about it right yet. As if Jesus doesn’t know all along who we are or what we up to.

Santa isn’t the only one who knows who’s naughty and nice. But Mark isn’t trying to make us crazy in either our prep or our waiting. He’s not trying be fanatical in our prep. But he challenges our natural complacency.

How do we wait, preparing for maybe an imminent arrival, or if we read it through different eyes, needing to dig in, stay faithful, and prepare for the long haul?

History, art, literature—they all offer examples of this kind of thinking, of both the immediacy and the end time, and what happens in the middle in the day-to-day as we are caught between these two realities.

Who really thinks this way today? Does anyone go through every day, wondering at morning, noon, or night if NOW is the time that someone long gone may return?

Soldiers and their families. Refugees and migrants. But also people who are not in mortal crisis—people who are in love exist in anticipation of the soon and very soon as they remember the last encounter and await the next.

My father didn’t save much from his life and didn’t talk about growing up and in the years prior to his marriage to my mother. But when he died, we found that both my mom and dad shared what I’m trying to describe. My father did all he could to defer his being drafted into the Army during the Korean conflict, and eventually served out his years at US Army Alaska before it was one of our 50 states. Both of them wrote to one another each day. They were letters that talked of their love, but also their struggles right here, right now, with family, parents, friends, circumstances, and how to figure out the impact of knowing that there is an end coming, but how to figure out the mechanics of hope and longing.

Racy pictures in swimsuits. Racy dialogue to one another which also seemed proportional to the struggles of their realities on base or on the job. They didn’t know how to keep going, but acknowledging the suffering of being apart seemed as much a mutual connection as being in the same room and in an embrace. They exchanged momentos, racy swimsuit photos, vistas of a virgin Alaska wilderness long vanished, of the ordinary life on the Mississippi and the simplicity of eating catfish and corn for days on end. It was an exchange of hearts and souls that could not connect by phone in the days of long distance that cost upwards an hours’ wages for a minute of crackled voice connections if you could get through at all.

There were disappointments, and watching the world go by as their world stood still. Friends got jobs and got married, had kids, bought houses. And still they’re apart. There were impulses to throw it all in as parents and friends urged each of them to move on, that two years was just too long to wait. And the perception from both sets of families that the other was not marrying up to their potential. Longing does not happen without temptations, suffering, partial wins, and stinging defeats.

But people who are in love do that. And that may provide the best context for assessing the impact of our text today; the time of waiting being a newlywed waiting for the return of the bridegroom who has been inexplicably taken away, returning, but when?

What do you want us to do Jesus, how are we to wait? Christmas is here, all around us: is Advent real? Is the waiting worth it?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

It’s not all longing and suffering; there’s much to celebrate in waiting, too. And we affirm Christ’s presence through both Word and Sacrament in our Reformed tradition. We have a community of faith and fellowship of believers to lean on and learn from. That help us see hope, love us through despair, and give us the arms we need for an embrace. But Mark’s point remains: Christ is not with us as he once was, and he is not with us as he will be.

Life is hard for many here and beyond Greenland’s borders. But even as we count our blessings, let us not be complacent—there is more, and better, in God’s great and gracious kingdom. There is an end, and in the process, we can build, too.

By the way, I read in one of those letters that my father, with the help of a clever quartermaster, got an early pass to surprise my mother and come home to her after only 11 months in Alaska. They got married that week and the end had come happily and unexpectedly. But then a new waiting began, but with renewed hope.

Advent invites us to wait impatiently for hope to be realized, longing to know God as fully as we have been known. Let us love as we have been loved. TBTG, Amen.