

Church of the Holy Spirit, Plymouth
I Advent Year C 29 November 2015

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, a brief, barely four-week-long season of waiting and anticipation for the annual celebration of the coming of God into human life in the birth of Jesus at Christmas.

There is, of course, no historical or even biblical evidence that tells us exactly on what date Jesus was born, so the Church in Rome, sometime in the fourth century, simply chose the date of December 25th. That wasn't an arbitrary choice, but it also wasn't based on any real notion of when our Lord's birth might have taken place. In secular culture in which the Early Church lived, the feast of the Roman Sun God, Mithras, was observed on the 25th of December. That was also the last day of Saturnalia, an ancient festival of unrestrained merrymaking. So the Church intentionally chose December 25th to provide early Christians with alternative to the way most of their culture was celebrating at that time.

Interestingly enough, history tells us that a hundred years hadn't passed before there were already church writers complaining about how the ways of the surrounding culture were shaping the Church's observance of Christmas. Some things never change.

Today, some lament that immediately following the great festival of food and football that we call Thanksgiving, the world around us dashes into a head-long, full-tilt season of holiday making and gift purchasing. I was proud to see that this year several large companies sought to reverse the trend and chose not to open on Thanksgiving evening, with one or two even closing on Black Friday and encouraging their employees to get outdoors and enjoy time with family and friends. However, I am not one of those who is easily offended at hearing carols played in stores. Nevertheless, I would hope that in our rush to get everything accomplished before December 24th, we might not lose sight of this Season of Advent.

Today, I would have us give some thought to Advent. The word "Advent" comes from the Latin, and it means "*a-coming*." It points both to our celebration of the Messiah's first coming centuries ago, but also to Christ's anticipated coming again at the end of time. Lessons about the end of time were part of our lectionary two weeks ago, and they appear again this Sunday. I have a feeling that whoever it is who decided on that schedule of readings never had to preach on apocalyptic texts Sunday after Sunday. Yet I see these writings as less about "*fear and foreboding*" over "*what is coming upon the world*," and instead giving us a hopeful message that God's loving purposes will finally win out, despite the way the world is.

The biblical readings for this First Sunday of Advent are a reminder that the world we live in is not always a beautiful place. Oh, it is sometimes, but not all the time – not in a world with cancer and divorce, a world marred by extreme ideology and threatened by climate change, to say nothing of the abject poverty in which millions still struggle to live and survive. The biblical writers looked squarely at the mess humanity makes of life, at a world marred by hatred and war, and they despaired for humanity. But these prophets also were able to look beyond the present with hope, a hope based on the understanding the God is in charge, and that in the end, God's will, in fact, will be done.

Frederick Buechner, in a little book titled '*Wishful Thinking*,' begins his definition of Messiah by quoting an old German saying that I won't even try to pronounce ("*Wie man's macht, ist falsch*"), but which he roughly translates as, "*whatever men do, it turns out lousy*." Whatever men do, it turns out lousy. "The Russians throw out the tsars and end up with communism. The Americans free their slaves, so they can move into ghettos," and so on.

And I think he's right. We tried to eradicate terrorism by launching two wars and somehow end up squandering all the worldwide sympathy that was ours on the days following September 11th 2001. We tried to establish democracies by sending our armed forces to occupy Afghanistan and Iraq, only to find the chaos of forces almost beyond our control. As the pessimistic German verse says, "*Whatever men do, it turns out lousy.*"

For many in our secular society, these next four weeks that we call Advent will be experienced simply as the warm-up act for Christmas. Shoppers will spend hours online trying to find the best bargains or will be teased into big box stores and crowded malls, where they will hear endless Christmas music, all the while blissfully trying to ignore the difficult economics times, or the realities of extreme climate change, and the tragic news of random suffering that seems to be a daily occurrence.

But for Christians, for those of us who look to the next four weeks as something more than simply a hectic time of getting ready for one more holiday, Advent is not a time to ignore the painful realities of the lives of so many people, rather it can be a time of honest and realistic assessment of the world in which we live and our part in it.

For you see, part of our Advent observance, part of what should be a joyful time of preparation for Christmas, also involves the recognition and the reminder that our history is not about some sort of gradual human progress in which there will be progressively less and less evil and more and more good. No, our history, the history of humanity, seen from a religious perspective, is not about our triumphs. Our history, salvation history, is not about our world getting progressively better, but instead about God's persistent love, a love culminating in the coming of the one who suffered with and for us, the one, who at the end, will make all things new.

Our first reading came from the Book of Jeremiah, a prophet who lived during one of the most chaotic periods in the history of Israel. Jeremiah's ministry and preaching spanned the total defeat of his nation in battle and the exile of most of its leading citizens to far off Babylon. Jeremiah had predicted the fall of Jerusalem, but at the same time he also preached a message of hope - hope that in God's hands Jerusalem would one day be rebuilt and the people would experience a new covenant under a new descendant of David, the one who would inaugurate a kingdom of justice and righteousness.

Likewise, the first century Mediterranean world, in which the gospel author Luke wrote today's gospel, also experienced distress for the people of God. But Luke recalls Jesus' message of caution against *fear and foreboding* in reaction to what was taking place in the world. Just as with Jeremiah, imbedded in description of worldwide upheaval is also a message of hope, a message of redemption beyond the mess that humanity seems to make of the world.

The Season of Advent is a time of both realism and hope, a time to recognize that we live is a world of "not-yet," a world that is not yet fully the Kingdom of God that Jesus saw initially breaking in within his lifetime. But what that also says to me - is that God is not through with us yet, that all appearances to the contrary, God does care about this creation, and that God is faithful and will, in God's good time, bring all created things to perfection.

So what does Advent have to say to us? First, it says to me, that I don't have to worry about those dire predictions in the gospel reading about the world's end, because God is in charge. But more than that, it tells me that I don't have to be perfect, and that I don't have to despair that we are not yet a perfect world. That, too, is in God's hands. My task, the world's task, as we heard from Jesus this

morning, is to “*stand up*” and “*raise your heads,*” looking forward and being ready for the new things that God has in store for us.

Still, this trusting that all is in God’s hands doesn’t mean that there is nothing for us to do. The Kingdom of God, the gospels remind us, is already inaugurated, and brought into being by the incarnation of Jesus. It is already among us in a variety of ways through which we see the lives of people transformed. But it is not yet fully realized. And there is a danger of our simply imagining that one day, perhaps far off in the future, God will swoop in and clean things up. The temptation is to passively wait for God to show up and make all things new.

But that’s not what Jesus asks of us. No, we are called to live as active and alert citizens of God’s kingdom now. As the collect for this First Sunday of Advent suggests, we expect that God will give us grace to “*cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*” ‘*Cast away*’ and ‘*put on*’ are action words that call us to consider what it is in our lives that have keep us from putting God or others first, then to cast those things away. And we are called to be alert, alert to the needs of the poor and to this suffering planet of ours.

One of our former Presiding Bishops, Edmond Browning, was quoted as saying, “Advent is not passive, anxious waiting; it is active, joyful preparation...(with) reflection and reform, (with) faithfulness and patience. Advent is the awareness that God is both at the end of our journey and a companion through it.”

The real message of Advent, for me, is that God **has** come in our past, and God **will** come in our future, but **also** that God is in our present. Therefore, take an honest look at yourself and cast away whatever it is that keeps you from recognizing that God is here with us in all that we do right now.

In a conversation the other day, a friend told me how much he continually enjoys whatever version of Charles Dickens’ Christmas Carol appears on television this time of year. I, too, love that old story, the story of spirits and ghosts and Christmas goose. For it is really humanity’s story, a story of man making a mess of things, and yet a story of the always present possibility of being born anew, of casting away the works of darkness and despair, and putting on the new possibilities that God offers us. The struggles of Ebenezer Scrooge to find his true self, his new recognition of who he is and who he can still be, I hope, will always be a part of our Advent preparation. For each of us, if we will, can be attentive to God’s kingdom and allow the holy to break through the clutter of our days.

The strange, countercultural season of Advent, you see, is a time for both waiting **and** action: not in fear of our personal demise; not in dread or foreboding over the world’s end; and also not in despair over humanity’s failure to create a world with justice and peace; but rather a time for standing up and being awake to the presence of God in our midst.

The Jewish Talmud, a collection of teaching written during that period of Exile in Babylon, includes an admonition based on the words of prophet Micah, “*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*” It says, “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justice, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Advent, I believe, can be for us a time of joyful expectation, but not of passive inaction. For Advent comes with the message that the one who made all that is can and will make us, and all things, new. *Amen.*