

Advent I, Year C
Good Shepherd Berkeley
November 29, 2009

Jeremiah 33:14-15
Ps. 25:1-9
I Thess. 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Today preachers in Christian liturgical churches around the globe are saying something like “Happy New Year!” because it is, of course, the first Sunday of the new liturgical year, the first Sunday of Advent. You may have noted a change in the color of our vestments – Sarum blue instead of the green of the long season after Pentecost. And we have a different service booklet. The liturgy may seem to have less exuberance and more reflection. The Gloria is replaced by the Kyrie. And the lessons – all that apocalyptic stuff – what is up with that???? What is up, of course, is the season of Advent, that time in the Church year when Christians prepare for Christmas. Traditionally this has been a time of a quieter reflection. In Advent the Church endeavors to make us ready on two planes – past and future. We rehearse the past through prophets words giving voice of the longing of generations for the promised messiah, celebrating that birth, of course, in the Feasts of Christmas and Epiphany. We also focus our attention toward the future with expectancy for what God has yet to unfold in the divine dance with human kind. In Advent, then we are invited to make a clearing, opening a space in our lives to receive the coming of God into human life, the Incarnation. That mystery is, as the Fourth Century theologian, Athanasius said, when God became human so that humanity might become more like God. In Advent spend a lot of time liturgically, remembering what the prophets said about the promised coming of God into history, and also the need for human preparedness in response to this event.

I'm really grateful for the opportunity to be preaching on this first Sunday of Advent because for more Advents than I can remember I've gotten to the days before Christmas and felt like I've really missed something, squandered an opportunity, even. And that's very sad; because this is a season I love. Perhaps it's the shorter days or the colder weather; I feel this longing to turn inward seeking more quiet, more time for reflection. My heart turns toward contemplative prayer like some little animal burrowing down under the roots of a tree trying to stay warm. My sense of these longings is that this season taps something quite primordial in the human psyche and you know what? This year I don't want to miss it.

The theologian Wendy Wright says, "Advent is a kind of 'keeping vigil' for the coming of the unimaginable fruition of the seed of God growing from the beginning in the heart of God." It is a time of getting ready for something that is going to happen – and that something is the birth of Jesus. It happened in history, in linear time, and so we remember.

Liturgical time is different, however. We live in a world of linear time but Christians are also immersed in circular time, where the end always marks a new beginning. So the making-ready quality of Advent is a preparation of *ourselves* for the coming Birth of Christ in our lives. Christmas *will* be different this year because something new is going to happen – IF, if, we pay attention. Advent, then, is a time of learning to pay attention.

While both these tensions of linear time and circular time unwittingly define the days of December, Advent's face toward the past is usually the one we seek. How very wonderful that a gracious God broke in upon the life of humankind through the birth of Jesus, God's very own Son! But Advent's face to the future is one that also deserves our attention. The coming of the Babe to Bethlehem, for all of its miraculous grace, is but hint and suggestion of the Second

Advent when this same Jesus, now Risen Lord and Savior, will return to claim the world that is his.

On this First Sunday of Advent, while the lectionary texts for this day help us look in both directions, the emphasis is clearly on “Advent again,” Christ’s return to rule with compassion and power. The passage from Jeremiah draws heavily on the language of prophetic judgment to make an important statement about God’s grace to come “in those days.” The First Epistle to the Thessalonians looks forward to “the coming of our Lord Jesus” as the climax of human experience and urges love and holiness on all who wait for that climax of human history. Yet, while both love and holiness are worthy goals toward which to strive, in the end they are the gifts of a gracious God. The Gospel from Luke is heavy in apocalyptic imagery. It anticipates the Second Advent with the admonitions “Be on guard.” “Be alert.” Watch!” (Brueggeman p. 1-2)

I said a minute ago that Advent is a time of making ready on two planes – on the past event of Christ’s coming in history, but also it is a making ready for Christ’s coming again at the end of time.

At the beginning of this new Church Year our hearts and minds are directed to the culmination of our lives and our world. It seems quite odd to inhabit such a mindset when all around us people are focused on managing simply the next thing. There is a perspective that liturgical time lends, a counter-cultural perspective, in fact. Lines to describe this come to mind from T. S. Eliot’s poem, “Little Gidding”

What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. . . .
With the dawning of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

There is a cosmic quality to this time of preparation for the future. And the church will make us uncomfortable with its remembrance of the words of prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures. They talk about ‘the day of the Lord’ and ‘the day of judgment’ in the lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures in the coming weeks. The prophets remind us of our capacity to destroy one another and God’s creation. So we might well say that ‘far from being God’s intentional punishment, the day of judgment is our own doing. We release its wrath. We create its whirlwind. God isn’t the one who fractures our relationships or makes cigarettes that waste our bodies or guns that kill the people we love. God hasn’t poisoned our rivers and polluted our seas and cut down our forests. We are the ones who wreak this havoc and therefore we suffer too often at our own hands.

At the same time the warnings of the prophets always harbor a seed of hope. God who releases us to choose the worst has also shown us by example how to be the best. “God never abandons us completely to the ineluctable consequences of human wrong doing. Rather we are at the mercy of God, which is a mercy indeed.” (HS Advent 2000)

This, it seems, is what the scriptures call the judgment of God: to see ourselves and our world as God sees us and *at the same time* to know that love is not withheld but so freely offered that new life is possible. And so Advent is a time of hope.

Advent is our annual wakeup call to hope. Hope takes us beyond wishes and dreams and into quite another realm – the realm of yearning. “Hope is the energy of the immigrant and the companion of the devastated...It leads by way of truth and delivers us into patience, persistence, and courage.” (WW)

Advent says that even loosing everything we possess and are is not God’s final judgment on us and our world. The final judgment on our humanity and on our world has already been

made known in the One who has come and is to come, Jesus the Christ. He who has endured and triumphed over suffering is near, when the signs point to destruction. He who makes whole our lives and that of the whole creation is most readily found when wholeness appears least possible. Advent says, LOOK OUT!, not for the number of shopping days 'til Christmas but for The Day of The Lord. We get this in the Gospel lesson when Jesus begins with words of apocalyptic cataclysm. His point is not cosmic doom, however. The point is made in the little parable of the fig tree – pay attention to the signs. Just as you know that the leafing of the fig tree means summer is near, so also pay attention to the signs that your redemption is drawing near. Pay attention to the desire to turn inward. Pay attention to the psyche's summons to quiet, for God desires to draw near to us again and always, through the birth of Love. If we pay attention, the scriptures say, then on that day hope will dissolve into reality and despair into the embrace of love. Until then, our only alternative is to live as if the future was already present, lest we fail to recognize the signs of its arrival.

Like hope, promise is another of the great themes of this time of preparation in the Church Year. During Advent we are enticed to turn our attention to the fact that we are recipients of a promise. Jeremiah says, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to Israel..." As a culture we seem to have little time for promises of the sort held out in the words of the prophets, promises whose telling plunges us deep into the wideness and mercy of God: "I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land... Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety."

We, on the other hand, attend to promises of a much more limited and transitional nature. "The future is so bright – plug into Best Buy electronics!" "Tis the season for a free upgrade, fa la la la!"

Promise is at the heart of the season of the Coming. Opening our hearts to the radical nature of the promise is more compelling in this Advent Season than any other. “What we all dream, what we all hope for is simple. We dream that the glimpses of the fullness of love that we sense occasionally in our lives, show us what we were created to become. When a new dad takes his daughter into his arms for the first time or a mom eases the midnight fears of her frightened child. When a family makes its way to the bedside of a dying loved one and finds itself bathed in the mystery of love. When a community provides an environment for healing or when a fearful stranger becomes for us the face of God, it is then that we begin to sense what we are intended to be – God’s children, the children of promise. (WW pp 23-24) Advent asks us to enter this promise in a way no other liturgical season avails. Let’s not squander it. Let’s be in it.

We are a people of hope as we are a people of the Promise. Let us use this Advent season, then, to pay attention to the signs of Christ’s coming, who is our Hope and our Promise.