

Sunday, December 3, 2017
First Sunday of Advent (Year B)
Isaiah 64.1-9; 1 Corinthians 1.3-9; Mark 13.24-37
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As we begin this season of Advent, it is worth a little refresher as to just what Advent is about. After all, it's been a whole year since we last did this. The word "advent" simply means "coming." And of course, in the Christian context, Advent is about the coming of Christ. Occurring post-Thanksgiving, in the run-up to Christmas, when we (and pretty much everyone else around us) are anxiously anticipating and frantically preparing for Christmas, we naturally equate Advent with the coming of Christ at Christmas. Well, half right. Actually, only about a quarter right. Advent is certainly a season of expectant anticipation and preparation for the coming of our Lord into the world. But Advent is not just about preparing for the birth of the Christ child.

The formula for celebration of Advent is always the same. Each Advent, the first Sunday deals with Christ's Second Coming at the end of the ages and with our readiness for divine judgment. The second Sunday deals with the ministry of John the Baptist as the one who prepares the way of the Lord. The third Sunday continues with John the Baptist and his call to a repentant life as the means for us personally preparing the way of the Lord. And only on the fourth Sunday do we have anything remotely Christmas-like, with a narrative anticipating the birth of Jesus. While this flow is backwards chronologically, it is actually intentional, to lay the foundation for just why the child born on Christmas is so important, what he has ultimately come to accomplish – our salvation – and how that all begins. And ends.

The season of Advent anticipates the coming of Christ from several different perspectives. God comes in the past in the history of Israel and the incarnation of Jesus. And he comes in the future at the end of the ages, at Christ's Second Coming. During Advent, therefore, we have the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, fulfilled through the birth of Jesus. And we have the opportunity to anticipate and prepare for his Second Coming.

At its core, Advent is about the art of waiting. Advent is about the task of preparedness. But as we look at the arc of salvation history, at the story of ancient Israel and its tumultuous relationship with God, at the story of the new covenant through Jesus Christ, and the promise of new and eternal life through Christ's death and resurrection, the question could be asked: If Advent is about waiting, whose waiting? Ours, or God's? If Advent is about preparedness, whose preparedness? Ours or God's?

Is it about us patiently waiting for the Lord, knowing that we have done our very best to be prepared? Hoping that we are adequately prepared. That we are ready to go at a moment's notice. Or is it about God waiting for us to be prepared? Waiting for us to get our act together, for that time when we will be ready. Or is it about us trying to keep God at arm's length because we know we are not yet ready. That we just have too much to do before the Second Coming. That we need more time to get our own stuff done. Then maybe we can turn our attention to preparing for Christ's return.

Sometimes I wonder if the true state of affairs isn't really the latter. That we privately hope and pray that today is not the day. That this is not the hour. That we might have a little more time. A few more days. A few more weeks. Maybe even a few more months or years.

In a sense, it all does indeed come down to timing. As to the first coming, Jesus' birth, we are able to point to a particular date – December 25th. Well, it's pretty certain that Jesus was not born on December 25th, but that is the date the Church has chosen for the commemoration and celebration of this significant event. But we don't have a date on the calendar that we can point to as the time of the Second Coming. As Jesus tells us in today's Gospel, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13.32). But he also told his disciples "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (Mk 13.30). Implying that he would return during their lifetime. And yet, we still wait. Yes, we know neither the day nor the hour. It's still up in the air. Maybe because we are still not prepared.

If we judge our readiness by how prepared we are for Christmas, we get really mixed signals on that one. Based on Christmas decorations in stores and malls and Christmas carols over PA systems and on the radio, some alien looking in on our planet might think that we are more than ready. That we've been ready for months. But if you look at the people in the malls, or in front of their computers, frantically looking for that perfect gift, if you talk to pretty much anyone on the streets, our words and our stress levels tell a different truth. What? Only 21 more shopping days left 'til Christmas?!? Many of us are far from prepared. And we are not just sitting around waiting for Christmas. If anything, we are secretly wishing it was at least a week or two or ten farther down the road. If anything, the season of Advent, with its wreath and four candles – each week an additional one being lit – serves as a countdown. A flaming visual reminder that the time until Christmas has rapidly burning away behind us.

We are hardly ready for the countdown to Christmas. Unless you are a child. Or one of those lucky ones who is already done with the shopping, the wrapping, the baking, the decorating, and can just sit back and relax and wait. No, we are hardly ready for a set date on the calendar 21 days from now. Let alone ready for some unknown date for the Second Coming that may be years or centuries or millennia down the road. Or may be one tick of the clock away. How can we be prepared for that if we can't even get ready for a time-certain event like Christmas?

Perhaps the answer is not in trying to anticipate and prepare for the celebration of a past event. Perhaps the answer is not in trying to anticipate and prepare for a future event. In our preparations for our celebration of Jesus' birth in the past, but even more in our preparations for Christ's Second Coming in the future, we seek to experience Christ in the present. As his followers, we eagerly anticipate those ways that we might encounter him. We prepare through worship, with emphasis on the words of scripture and song, and the meal at the table. And we prepare through our everyday lives, through our joys and sorrows, through which Christ continually makes himself known to us. Just as the people of Isaiah's time, having returned from Exile only to find their beloved Jerusalem destroyed, their land decimated – in their joy of freedom but also in their sorrow at their destroyed homes and way of life – still managed to

encounter something of the living God. Of how they cried out “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Is 64.1). Wanting to be with their God in real and tangible ways.

Advent deals with the coming of Jesus Christ into our midst in so many different ways. During this season we reflect on the ways God through Christ has, continues to, and will continue to, come into our lives. We see this in our readings for today. One of the overarching themes of this season, particularly as reflected in today’s readings, is faithfulness. Isaiah is concerned with the enduring, albeit sometimes strained, relationship between God and his people; imploring God to remember his faithfulness in the past; imploring him to come to their rescue yet again. The reading from 1st Corinthians also focuses on God’s faithfulness; on how the people have continually been enriched by God; and of his loving commitment to the salvation of his people. The reading from Mark’s Gospel takes this theme of faithfulness and shifts the focus to examine our faithfulness to God, with Jesus imploring us to “keep awake.” Reminding us of our commitment to God above all else. Reminding us that just as God has always been faithful to us, we must continually be faithful to him.

Advent is not so much about an extended pre-Christmas celebration. Not even so much a time to worry about some unknown time of judgment and whether or not we will be ready. Instead, it is a time to awaken and be attentive to the surprising ways Christ comes to us here and now. To cherish those moments of deep relationship with our Lord, wherein he proves his faithfulness to us, and we are given the opportunity to show our faithfulness to him. In direct ways and indirect. In word and in action. Ongoing acts of anticipation and preparation, so that when the time does indeed come, be it for Christmas or the Second Coming, we will be awake and ready to meet our Lord with joy and confidence.