

Sunday, December 1, 2019
First Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Isaiah 2.1-5; Romans 13.11-14; Matthew 24.36-44

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“The Restlessness of Advent”

Today is the first day of Advent—the beginning of a new year, liturgically speaking. For me, this day, this season, carries the same weight as does the beginning of the new year that we celebrate every January 1st. It is a time of reflection about where I have been, what I have accomplished, in the previous year. And a time to acknowledge what I have not accomplished and to either let go of those hopes as being not that important or to resolve anew to make those things happen if they are indeed still that important to me.

The season of Advent is particularly appropriate for such reflection, personally and as a faith community. For Advent is that enigmatic season that resides both in the past and the future. And therefore, spanning the present. The themes of Advent look to the past, at the anticipation for the coming of Jesus at his birth at Christmas. And at the same time, Advent looks to the future, anticipating, expecting, preparing for, the coming of Christ at the end of the ages—the Second Coming. Although, in our progression through this season, we actually start with a focus on the future, on the anticipated Second Coming, and slowly move to the past, as we shift our focus to preparations for Christmas. In both instances—looking to the future Second Coming of Christ and looking to the past First Coming that is the birth of Jesus—we enter into a time of intentional watching, intentional waiting. In fact, this tone of watching and waiting is set in our Scripture readings for this First Sunday of Advent, with both the Epistle and the Gospel containing these images—images that are more or less unique to our lectionary for Year A.

It is this watching and waiting that, as one commentator writes, makes Advent “the season that most honestly names and acknowledges our human condition of longing, waiting, and restlessness” (*Sundays and Season Preaching: Year A 2020*, p. 16). When I ran across that statement, I was particularly drawn to the last part about restlessness. I had always thought of Advent as about anticipation, expectation, and preparation, but never about restlessness. Of course, children (of all ages) grow restless at the anticipation of the coming of Christmas. But does that restlessness extend to the anticipation of the Second Coming, as well? While I admit that there are those days when I cry out to God, “if you’re going to end it all, today would be a good day,” most of us don’t particularly long for, are not particularly restless for, the end to come anytime soon. After all, we still have so much to accomplish. We still have so many things that we would like to do before all this comes to an end. But as I reflected on this quality, this condition, in light of the readings for today, it seemed to make some sense. Not so much about being restless for the end, but restless in terms of what do we do while we are waiting for the end—whenever that might be.

We see something of this in our lectionary readings for today. We see the thread of restlessness running through these readings. And, we see indications of what we are expected to do with this restlessness. As already noted, this day and the entire season of Advent provide the countdown to the First Coming of the baby Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem. We know the

timing and when it will happen. Just 24 shopping days until Christmas. But this season also points ahead, especially in our reading from Matthew, to the Second Coming of Christ. In our Gospel reading, Jesus is emphatic about the timing of that event. “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mt 24.36).

Jesus then gives several examples of what he means by this. He starts by recalling an ancient story. “For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Mt 24.37-39). The people in Noah’s time were completely oblivious to the fact that God was about to flood the entire world. Instead, they were focused on the concerns of their everyday lives. Just as we are. He concludes his explanation by noting that the Son of Man will come like a thief in the night, completely unexpected. But he also notes that even in the unexpectedness, those who follow him are to stay awake, those who are watchful and vigilant will be sufficiently prepared. That they are to look for his coming and while waiting, are to remain faithful to his teachings in word and action.

Similarly, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, compares the return of Christ to the coming of the dawn. He warns that they are not to become complacent in their waiting for Christ’s return. Paul goes on to provide instruction on how Christians are to live their lives during this time of waiting. That they are to live honorably, laying aside inappropriate behavior and personal desires, and to instead “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13.14). In this, Paul is encouraging, even instructing, those who follow Christ to transform their identity and lifestyle to conform to those of Christ.

So what does this mean, exactly? For that, we need to look back to the wisdom of the ancients who likewise awaited the coming of a new reality. In our Old Testament reading, the Prophet Isaiah foretells a new age. Looking through the eyes of faith beyond the present reality that his people are experiencing, Isaiah presents an image of the future in which the world is transformed and made new under the universal reign of God. This is a future in which all nations will flock to Zion, to the house of God: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” (Is 2.3a).

While the passage uses an image for the hoped for age that we now associate with the Second Coming, the end of the ages, the Last Judgement, this passage does not so much talk about a new reality that will be thrust upon us, with God coming to us in great glory. An image that we commonly associate with the end times. Rather, it speaks to our own initiative, to our own actions. That the people will flock to God on his holy mountain, out of desire to learn his ways and to follow his paths. Of course, that which will be truly life-changing for the world then follows: “For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Is 2.3b-4). Just a word of caution: this does not mean that we can initiate the end times through our actions or through our

faithfulness. As Jesus will tell his followers some 700 years later, “about the day and hour no one knows . . . only the Father” (Mt 24.36).

Throughout Scripture, God has had some of his most significant encounters with humankind on mountains: Mount Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the Mount of the Transfiguration, the Mount of Olives, Zion. In our modern language, a “mountaintop experience” is one so overwhelming that it is life-changing. It changes our future. Or, at least, has the potential to. While what happens on the mountain, in our mountaintop experiences is significant, what is more critical is what we do with those experiences. Scripture likewise shows us that we cannot stay on the mountaintop forever. Moses had to come down after receiving the Ten Commandments, to give them to the people to begin following. The people listening to Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount could not stay there and spend the rest of their days listening. They had to return to their homes and their workplaces, to share the message they had heard. Peter, James, and John could not stay on the Mount of the Transfiguration. They had to come down after the revelation of who Jesus truly is, so that after his death and resurrection, they could carry on the message. For us, the mountain is wherever we receive the word of God, experience God’s presence. And we, too, must come down the mountain to share the experience of God’s love.

For this, Jesus, in our Gospel reading, gives a warning to look beyond our daily routines and to consider life anew in light of what God is going to do in the world through the Second Coming. That he will make all things new. He instructs us to use our restlessness not in pursuit of our own interests, but in pursuit of God’s interests. That those who in their restlessness carry on Jesus’ ministry, his work of caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, the widow and the orphan, the marginalized; that those who have loved their neighbors as themselves; they will be the ones who will be prepared to receive our Lord when he returns.

During the season of Advent, we look to the past as we anticipate the First Coming of Jesus at his birth. And we experience restlessness at the anticipation of the joy of celebrating our Savior coming into the world. During this season of Advent, we look to the future as we anticipate Christ’s Second Coming at the end of the ages. And we experience restlessness as we wonder when this will happen, what this will look like. In between, in the present, we have an opportunity. Rather than just sit and wait, we can use the restlessness of Advent. To invoke the prophecy of Isaiah to take the initiative and not just wait, but to “go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths” (Is 2.3). In the restlessness of the present, we are to be awake to the fact that even now, Christ comes to us in the words and sacraments of our worship, which energize us to be attentive to the present needs of the world. Recognizing that we don’t need to wait—we can’t wait—for Christ to come to begin the work of building the Kingdom of God. That we have it within us to begin that work even now.

In this Advent season, we are invited to wake up, to be attentive to Christ’s presence among us here and now, and to use the restlessness that comes with waiting to prepare ourselves and the world to meet Christ anew when he comes at Christmas and at the end of the ages.