

Sunday, December 3, 2023

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64.1-9; 1 Corinthians 1.3-9; Mark 13.24-37

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/413120754370843>

(Sermon begins at about 24:25)

“Preparing for the Coming of the Messiah—Be it the First or the Second”

Happy New Year!

Today we turn the page on the liturgical calendar and begin a new year as we start our annual commemoration of Advent. Advent is often thought of as a time of anticipation of and preparation for Christmas. Sort of a precursor to the Christmas season. In our secular society, it all really runs together, with the “official” start of the Christmas season being the Black Friday sales on the day after Thanksgiving. But from a religious standpoint, that is really only partially true. The true meaning of Advent and what it represents is so much more than just how many days are left until Christmas. FYI, it’s 21.

Advent is a season of expectant anticipation and preparation for the coming of our Lord into the world. Of course, given the time of the year, we naturally default to thinking of this as a time of anticipation and preparation for the birth of the baby Jesus on Christmas. But Advent is not just about preparing for the birth of the Christ child. The season of Advent anticipates the coming of Christ in two different ways. First, we have the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, which we recognize as being accomplished through the birth of Jesus. And second, we anticipate his Second Coming at the end of the ages. In a broader sense, Advent is really about the coming of Jesus Christ into our midst in a variety of ways, at his birth, at the end of the ages, and every point in between. During this season we reflect on the ways Christ has and continues to come into our lives. With the culmination of that reflection and anticipation being the joyous celebration of Christmas.

Before we get to the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child at Christmas, we spend the first portion of Advent looking at, anticipating and preparing for, Christ’s Second Coming at the end of the ages. The foretelling of which we hear in our Gospel reading for today. Now, in some ways, focusing on the Second Coming before we even celebrate the First Coming, seems a bit counterintuitive. And, to be honest, this has always puzzled me a bit. Shouldn’t we be looking at the First Coming before we even start thinking about the Second Coming. I mean, if the First Coming is Jesus’ birth and the Second Coming is his return at the end of the ages, shouldn’t we flip the order in our commemoration of Advent? Maybe let Jesus get born and grow up before we jump to the end of the salvation story?

But there really is a logic to it all, to looking at the end of the ages before we even consider the birth of Jesus. Sort of like some movies that begin with scenes of something significant happening to the hero, and then the rest of the movie jumps back in time to tell how we got to that ending—to how we got to what happened at the beginning of the movie. An interesting

literary device that not only builds suspense, but also adds to the sense of anticipation. That's what happens with Advent.

The movie of Advent starts with the Second Coming of Jesus at the end of the ages. Well, actually just the foretelling of his Second Coming. We have to wait to see how the real thing will play out. But in the story of Advent, after this first week where we focus on Jesus' foretelling his Second Coming, we then do move back in time, to see how we will get to the eventual Second Coming. And it really does make sense to look at this in the order presented because of the importance that the coming of the Messiah has played in the lives of faith, not just of Christians, but also in the lives of faith of our Jewish ancestors. Which, I really think, is why we do Advent in the order we do.

The Old Testament has a number of prophecies foretelling the coming of the Messiah. As recounted in the Old Testament, the faith of the Jewish people is based, in large part, on the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. The fervent longing for his coming. We hear one such account of desperate longing in our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

This reading is from what is referred to as Third Isaiah—the account of the nation of Judah having been in exile in Babylon for 60 years or so, now being allowed to return home. What they find is destruction and desolation, including the fact that their beloved temple has been destroyed. They face great hardship at the prospect of rebuilding the temple and their livelihood in their ancient homeland. Out of this hopelessness, while also recognizing God's sovereignty over their lives, recognizing God's compassion for his people, the Prophet cries out to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Beginning a lament in which the people cry out to God, complain to God, plead with God, demand of God. Naming the emotional truth of what they are feeling. Recognizing that if they are going to get through this, if they are going to rebuild the temple and their lives, they are going to need God's mercy: "Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people." Once again calling for God's compassion to help get them through what seems to be an impossible situation.

While not specifically an oracle or a foretelling of the coming of the Messiah, the emotions expressed in this fervent plea for God's compassion and mercy, for God's forgiveness, this recognition that the people are dependent upon God for their lives and wellbeing, carries a desire for redemption; an appeal for redemption. The same desire that undergirds the yearning for the long-awaited Messiah. The one who would come and usher in God's eternal kingdom. The one would come and make all things new. The one would come and bring new life to God's people.

As those who are descended from the Jewish tradition, our Christian tradition also carries that fervent longing for the coming of the Messiah. Of course, with Jesus there was a departure in expectations regarding the Messiah. We believe the Messiah has already come in the person of Jesus while our Jewish sisters and brothers continue to wait. This is just a difference in perspective, of interpretation as to what Messiah means. For our Jewish sisters and brothers, the coming of the Messiah will be for us the Second Coming.

We need to remember that the early Christians were originally Jews. Complete with the Jewish understanding of Messiah. Given this confluence of the Jewish and the Christian understandings of Messiah—this confluence for Christians in the person of Jesus—it begins to make sense that before we look at the birth of the One we consider to be the Messiah, we consider what ultimately Messiah means for us. And only then can we take a step back, looking at his birth to consider how we will ultimately get to the advent of the Messiah at the end of the ages. Only when we understand where we are heading, can we look back and see exactly how we got there. In fact, the early Church did not even celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus until 300 years after his death. Up until then, their entire focus was on Christ's resurrection and his eventual return.

This looking at the ultimate meaning of Messiah is the subject of our reading from the Gospel according to Mark. What we heard today is part of what is known as the Markan Apocalypse; part of Jesus' final teachings to his disciples before his Passion. The Bible is filled with apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic originally from the Greek meaning uncovering or revealing. Apocalyptic literature foretells of the author's vision of the end of the ages, which has been revealed through a heavenly messenger or God himself. And while we generally think of apocalyptic as being about trials and tribulations, about destruction—which is certainly a part of it—apocalyptic also includes an ultimate message of hope when all hope seems to be lost. Definitely an important, a critical, aspect of biblical apocalyptic literature.

What we hear today in our Gospel is the end of the Markan Apocalypse. Before we get to that, it helps to understand what went before in the apocalyptic image Jesus presents. The overall flow of this apocalyptic foretells the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Following this, there is a foretelling of the persecution of Jesus' followers by secular authorities. And then comes the somewhat cryptic "desolating sacrilege." While scholars are uncertain as to what Jesus means by this desolating sacrilege, it does appear to be an allusion to other Old Testament apocalyptic literature and possibly a foretelling of chaos and great suffering, and also the activity of false prophets and even false messiahs.

But then, in the final portion of this apocalypse that we hear today, Jesus provides a message of hope. The foretelling of the coming of the Son of Man. The Son of Man being an image used in some of the other ancient apocalyptic literature as the One who will save the faithful from destruction. In our Christian understanding, this can only mean the Second Coming of Christ. That, as he tells his disciples, we "will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." But, as he has done in our lessons over the last few weeks, Jesus issues a cautionary statement: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father . . . Therefore, keep awake . . . Keep awake."

We are not told what this keeping awake looks like. At least, not by Jesus in this particular apocalypse. Although other New Testament writings give us hints and clues, as we have discussed over the last few weeks. One such writing is in our Epistle reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul writes to the church in Corinth, seeking to provide guidance as they struggle with what it means to keep awake. As they struggle to figure out how they are to

await the anticipated Second Coming—which, at the time, they thought could happen at any moment. In his letter, Paul reassures the faithful in Corinth that they have been strengthened through the teachings of Christ, “so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” These words continue to apply equally 2,000 years later, to those of us who continue to await the coming of Christ. That the time between Jesus’ birth and Christ’s coming—whenever that happens—is not a time to twiddle our thumbs. We have a model in Jesus Christ himself. While we wait, we continue to be strengthened by Christ and his teachings. That we are continually being given what we need to maintain and even thrive in our lives of faith as we continue to wait. The Church is our school for continued training and nurture of the faithful who are the Body of Christ.

Another way of putting this is that we are an Advent people. Our lives are ultimately about preparing for the coming of our Lord. At Christmas. At the end of the ages with the Second Coming. And in every moment in between, as we continually seek to live more fully into who Christ calls us to be as his Body in the world. As we continue to grow and be strengthened in our waiting, so that we will be more fully prepared when he does come. Not only at Christmas, but also at the end of the ages.