

Sunday, November 30, 2025
First Sunday of Advent (Year A)
Isaiah 2.1-5; Romans 13.11-14; Matthew 24.36-44
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Invited into Hope”

Happy New Year!

Yes, today we begin a new liturgical year and a new liturgical season: Advent. The term Advent derived from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “coming” or “arrival.” The four-week season in which we anticipate and prepare for the coming of the Christ Child on Christmas.

Although, as we look at our readings for this, the First Sunday of Advent, there is nothing that even remotely points to the birth of Jesus, of God incarnate, of God in the flesh. Instead, in our Old Testament reading we get a lovely vision of a future Jerusalem and of universal peace. In our Epistle reading, we get a stern warning of the need to “wake from sleep” to prepare for some sort of battle, to “put on the armor of light.” And in our Gospel reading, we get even more and urgent warnings about the need to “keep awake” because we do not know when the Son of Man will come, and failure to be vigilant could result in our being left behind when he does come. All of these readings pointing not to the birth of the Christ Child, but rather to what is sometimes referred to as “the end times,” to the Parousia, to the Second Coming of Christ.

In actuality, the season of Advent, with its emphasis on anticipation and preparation, is not just about anticipating and preparing for the coming of Jesus at his birth in Bethlehem on Christmas. It is also about the themes and events we see portrayed in today’s readings: about the Second Coming of Jesus at the end of the ages.

As we begin this new liturgical year and this new season of anticipation and preparation, why do we begin with some future event down the road, “about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”? Wouldn’t it make more sense to go chronologically? To start with the First Coming—with the birth of Jesus—instead of with his Second Coming in the unknown future? Instead we get a bit of a cryptic sermon from Jesus mere days before his death. A message anticipating what will happen sometime after his death.

Perhaps, to adequately prepare for Jesus’ coming, for his birth at Bethlehem, we first need to have a clearer idea of why he is coming—why he was born—in the first place. To consider his ultimate purpose. After all, we aren’t just preparing and anticipating his birth at Christmas. We are anticipating what that birth will lead to. What will become of the life that begins in that manger. Just as Mary and Joseph undoubtedly had their hopes and dreams for their son, God had plans for who his Son would be, what he would accomplish. For his ultimate purpose.

Beginning our Advent journey, our Advent preparations, in the last few days of Jesus’ earthly life is therefore an appropriate place to start. For it his life and his public ministry that has brought him to this point. That has prepared him for his ultimate purpose. And this side of the Passion and the Resurrection, we know that what happens in Jerusalem that Holy Week—his

death and his resurrection—was the stepping stone, the transition, that would lead to his ultimate purpose. To the forgiveness of our sins and opening the way for eternal life in him. The eternal life that would be accomplished at the end of the ages, with his Second Coming. The age to come that is envisioned by the Prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading: the vision of a New Jerusalem, the Lord's home, where heaven and earth intersect. Where God and humanity will meet and dwell together for all eternity. Made possible only by the initial coming together of Divinity and humanity through the Incarnation. Through Jesus, born fully human and fully divine.

Here, in his last days, as he talks about some future event, Jesus seeks to bring us into the picture. After all, what happens in that future event is not for his benefit, but for ours. So, in these last few days of his earthly life and ministry, Jesus takes the opportunity to issue a wake-up call to his followers. Literally. Jesus invokes the well-known image of Noah: "for as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." Recalling that prior to God commanding Noah to build the ark everyone was going about their daily lives, completely oblivious to God's plans and purposes. To what God was about to do. But even more so, oblivious to God's laws. If not oblivious, then certainly willfully disregarding God's laws. Going about their day-to-day lives concerned only with themselves and their own interests. Disregarding, or at least minimizing, God's concerns and interests. Which is what led to the plan for the flood in the first place.

But keeping awake is not just so Jesus' followers will be ready for the Second Coming and the end of the ages. The call to "keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" is an invitation to what we are to do during the time of waiting. We are not to just sit around twiddling our thumbs or scrolling on our devices. As Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." There's work to be done. There are preparations to be made.

We are not talking the current survivalist mentality of going off the grid, out into the wilderness, away from urban areas, building bunkers, stockpiling supplies, and sequestering ourselves from humanity, hoping to ride it out. Rather, the work to be done, the preparations to be made, is to more fully engage with humanity. Just as God engaged with humanity through the Incarnation; by coming among us in the flesh to allow for a direct connection and relationship between God and humanity. The meeting of God and humanity in the form of Jesus being but a stepping stone, a precursor, to the fulfillment of the ultimate divine vision for the end of the ages.

Jesus' invitation to his followers tells us that Advent is about more than what Jesus did or will do. Just as God did God's part in the Incarnation, just as God and Christ will do their part at the end of the ages, we have our part to play in preparing for what is to come. For we are a critical part of what Advent is about. The lynchpin between the First Coming with the birth of Jesus and the Second Coming. For if we do not do our part, all the rest will be for naught. Just like the time of Noah.

Our part in Advent was eloquently put forward by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot and theologian. To further emphasis the sense of urgency of being prepared,

to emphasize the fact that Advent means “coming” and “arrival” in a variety of ways, Bernard wrote about three Advents. The first is the Advent at Christmas: the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus. The second is the Advent at the end of the ages: the Second Coming. And the third Advent is what happens between the first and the second: the coming, the arrival, of Christ in our midst, in our lives, on a day-to-day basis. The many ways that Christ comes to us: in our worship experiences, particularly at the table during Holy Communion; in our personal prayers and meditations; in opportunities to serve as his hands and feet through our acts of outreach and pastoral care; in a small act of kindness shown by a stranger; in the shoulder to cry on; in the one who sits silently, holding our hand, during a difficult time. In so many ways, great and small, obvious and subtle.

Our anticipating and preparing for Christ’s coming, in all its manifestations, means being present and particularly open and attentive to the ways we experience this third or middle Advent. To how we experience the coming of Christ into our midst in our day-to-day lives. But it goes even beyond how we experience Christ in our own lives. As people of faith, as those who are the Body of Christ in the world, part of what it means to be prepared is to truly BE the Body of Christ in all we do. This is what Paul talks about in our Epistle reading from the Letter to the Romans: “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.” Echoing Jesus’ call to his disciples to “keep awake.” Paul goes on to encourage us to “set aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Seeking to live in accordance with Christ’s teachings. Paul reiterates this by saying “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” An image of Christian discipleship, of living as Christ taught and modeled through his own ministry. Demonstrating through our own lives who Jesus was and continues to be.

Traditionally, each Sunday of Advent has a theme. The first (today) is Hope. Then come in succession Peace, Joy, and Love. As we begin this season, with the anticipation and preparation for Christmas, we celebrate the hope of new beginnings in Jesus’ birth. Itself a hope of a new beginning in the relationship between God and humanity. A relationship that extends from Jesus’ birth, to where we are today, and on into the future to Christ’s Second Coming. In our readings for today, we see examples of how that hope will be manifest. The hope of a New Jerusalem where heaven and earth intersect. In the final days of his earthly life, Jesus reiterates that message of hope of a New Jerusalem, promising that the Son of Man will come in the fullness of time to usher in that new age, although we know not when. A hopeful event ironically brought about through his Passion and Resurrection: the events that ultimately lead to the anticipated coming of the Son of Man, bringing the hope and the promise of eternal life to fruition.

This is a hope that we do not just anticipate or prepare for, but one we have the opportunity to fully participate in through our lives and our ministries. A hope that we are fully invited into. By Jesus, who invites us to “keep awake.” And by the Prophet Isaiah, who invites to become part of the Advent experience when he boldly proclaims, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”