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ADVENT 1

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When I feel I cannot go any further, He picks me up and tells me he knows. When I feel I cannot sink any lower, He pulls me out and tells me he sees. When I feel that the pain can't hurt any worse, He takes it away and shows me he cares. When I feel that I cannot open my heart, He reaches in and shows me he can. When I think that my life can't get any harder, I turn to Him. He's always there.

–Ms. Katie Nicole Aquino

What does Advent mean? It is a season observed in many Christian churches as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas as well as the return of Jesus at the second coming. The term is a version of the Latin word meaning “coming”.

Advent is originally a time to reflect and prepare for Christmas similarly to how Lent is in preparation for Easter. Advent has sometimes been referred to as the Winter Lent. In recent times the restrictions that Advent brings to Christians have become more relaxed.

Purple is historically the main color used for Advent because it reflects penitence, fasting, and the color of royalty to welcome the Advent of the king (Jesus Christ). The focus of the entire season is the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his first Advent, and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his second Advent. Some churches use other colors in recent times. For example, some churches mark the third Sunday of Advent with pink or rose, colors that represent joy. Many Protestant churches use blue to distinguish the Season of Advent from Lent. (Time and Date.com)

Now, I will apologize for getting up on my soapbox. Walmart has almost become my second home. (Forgive me sweet Jesus!) Even before Thanksgiving arrived the Christmas decorations for sale started materializing. God does have a sense of humor. He is doing this to personally tweek me. It's the bucket of cold water dumped on me in a hot shower. Because commercialism has blinded most of us to the true meaning of Christmas. So how do we receive the true meaning of Advent? How are we to understand and receive the Blessing from the lessons of Jeremiah and 1 Thessalonians. These are wonderful lessons that I could preach on for hours. But you don't want me to do that because the pews aren't padded and Bonnie just had her hip replaced. Jesus warns us in the Gospel reading from Luke that you heard today.

David Lose in the Working Preacher gave a good commentary about this warning from Jesus. “Christians should be alert, ready for the coming of the end. They should therefore not be caught up in the excessive pleasures or worries of the day, but rather remain watchful. At the same time, Christians should be confident, eager for the events Jesus describes as they signal the approach of the deliverance of the Christian community. Indeed the events that Jesus describes will be most worrisome for the ‘world’ and the ‘powers of heaven’ (21:26). Interestingly, the word usually translated as “world” isn't the more general kosmos but rather oikoumene, which conveys the more specific sense of the political and economic realm and sometimes signifies the Roman Empire. The coming of the Son of Man will therefore be threatening to the powers that be, but it will bring release from oppression for the followers of Christ.” I wonder how this would be perceived if Jesus were speaking before us today?

He goes on further to clarify how Jesus teaching may effect us in today's world. “At the same time, we are as intimately acquainted as they were (Luke's audience), with the challenges presented by waiting for an event that seems late in coming. We may be waiting for an event on a national or global scale like economic recovery, and end to war in Iraq or Afghanistan, or concerted international action to reduce pollution. Or we may be waiting for an event on a personal level like the results from a biopsy, a letter

from and estranged child, or the safe return of a loved one from a tour of duty. Whatever the case, we know the challenge of waiting, the anxiety of waiting.”

The “challenge of waiting” and the “anxiety of waiting” I think is something we can easily relate to. Certainly something I have become very intimately connected with. I have mentioned in the past that I am helping to care for my 92 year old Aunt who is in the advanced stages of Alzheimer’s. So this Gospel has a good message for me and my family. We definitely are “weighed down with the worries of life”. Jesus warns us against this, “and that catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

I read a prayer at the beginning of my sermon that I strongly related with to today’s Gospel. I found this in a wonderful book titled “Women’s Uncommon Prayers”. I sometimes forget or get distracted from God’s Love when I get “weighed down with the worries of life”. **Every single time that I get to the point that I feel like giving up, I turn to Him, He really is always there.**

I recently had a rough night with my Aunt. She was up eleven times throughout the night due to pain and anxiety. None of medication I had immediately at hand were working. So I grabbed what I call the Hospice Happy Meal from the frig. The kit contained some morphine and an anti-anxiety med that helps with Alzheimer’s patients. Called the nurse, got the order, administered the medication. I was praying for a miracle. I did not feel in control and felt powerless. To say nothing of the fact of her obvious pain and anxiety. These two feelings push me to the brink of insanity very quickly. My Aunt weighs about eighty pounds at four foot ten. So naturally the nurse suggests the average dosage. Well, she is not average. I put her in a near coma for two days. Family wasn’t happy with me. The companions that care for her during the day were not happy with me. She was lethargic, hallucinating and more unsteady than usual trying to walk.

So we start to let her come out of this but are still concerned with pain management. On scene comes our Earth Angel in a new Hospice nurse for us. Another answer to my prayers. So we try Lorazepam, which is a little milder for anxiety. Debbie promised her care givers that the near coma state was a fluke of the medication and she would be her bright self. NOT. Poor woman took a trip and never left the farm. Here I go again, “worries of the world”. I’m trying to listen to you Jesus, you need to help me out here because the lynch mob is on its way. I am being perceived as the Son of Satan.

There is much truth to the saying that “God works in mysterious ways”. My Aunt’s pain was out of control. The medication I was directed to give here actually reset her body cycle. Brought her pain under control so we could manage her care with regular meds. Kim, our new nurse, did an outstanding job calming the raging mob. Thank-you Jesus! She explained the necessity for medication reset, and was able to help us come up with a more suitable plan. My Aunt is now engaged in her surroundings. She was able to participate in the conversation of her care. She is alert, pleasant and cheerful. Still has some pain and naps a lot, but vast improvement. We “Bless your heart” she says.

Back to the miracle of Christmas and the birth of our Beloved Savior. Do you really think that the raging Christmas shoppers at the mall really care or understand about Advent and Christmas? I think there is great dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of life that are running rampant. Now what is dissipation? Curious language that Jesus uses, so I looked it up. I thought it might have something to do with dysentery but that didn’t make sense. Dissipated living: (1) “a descent into drunkenness”. Synonyms with debauchery, decadence and dissolution. (2) squandering of money energy or resources.” Certainly describes mall goers last time I was there. I refuse to go during the Christmas shopping season because I think it is utter insanity and I’m not that brave. I prefer Christmas Eve shopping because you get great deals at Rite Aid and Walmart. Although the Walmart greeter looks like Oscar the Grouch. Jeff

Dunham's Walter always said he wanted to be a Walmart Greeter. "Get your stuff and get out!" Of course he used a little more colorful language.

Soapbox again, I am a victim of my bias. Christmas is a most wonderful special time of year. It celebrates the trials of Mary and Joseph in bringing in this new life, this wonderful child, this Son of Man. They also did not have the greatest accommodations around. Certainly not like Motel Six where they will leave a light on for you. It is also one of my "dreaded" holidays. I get very upset and saddened at the obnoxious commercialism that pervades Christmas. Buy this, buy that. Most children think Christmas is all about getting presents. I do admit I enjoyed being a UPS diver assistant during holiday season. People handle it in a number of different ways. Some are very cheerful wishing a Merry Christmas laden down with packages. Others push, shove and snarl with their heavy burdens. Once the holiday passes they look at the mountain of bills that was a by-product of the shopping frenzy. I will admit that as a young child, Santa Claus was my Jesus. I looked forward to getting my Rock 'em sock 'em robots. Or my yellow stingray bike with the banana seat and big handle bars. My parents did do their best to instill into all their children the true meaning of Christmas. They were successful to a point. It was Santa Claus that kept us in line throughout the year, though.

So my heart goes out to the "unchurched" who don't understand or appreciate the Advent season or the true meaning of Christmas. I am grateful that we as Christians do understand the meanings and can appreciate the lessons and Gospels that surround this wonderful holiday. I think it is wonderful that we can share our beliefs and try to model the messages of the Lessons and Gospel readings. Why it is always important to welcome others into our home at St. John's during the holiday season and throughout the year. I believe the communicants at St. John's do an outstanding job of welcoming others. It is one of the reasons why I was drawn here and why I have stayed.

My parting thought for the day and this is probably going to get me in trouble:

"If there had been three wise women, would the Epiphany story have been different? You bet it would! They would have asked for directions, arrived early, delivered the baby, cleaned the stable, cooked the dinner, and brought practical gifts. God bless wise women!!

So the "Grace for Today":

Lord Jesus, I praise Your glorious name for you are the source of all my happiness because you delivered me and made me a child of God. AMEN