

Advent 1, Year B

November 30, 2014

“Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light...”

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It is the beginning of the church’s year in our tradition. We do things like lighting the Advent wreath here in church and making Advent wreaths that we can take home with us, to help us remember the season. There are often special devotional materials dedicated to this holy time (we have some available that our friends at St. Aidan’s have shared with us).

But compared to the secular holiday season that is also going on at this same time, Advent can seem a little tame, too quiet, even boring. I mean, there are no parties, shopping, TV specials, and popular music that are tied to and promote Advent. (As an aside, someone on the radio the other day listed the top ten most popular Christmas songs of all time and they all had one thing in common— none of them mentioned Jesus, even in passing.)

So Advent is a different type of season, characterized by words like “wait” and “prepare.” Many of you have heard me mention this difference repeatedly in the years since I have been here. Some of you even pointed out the irony of the “enforced Advent” I had to observe due to health issues two years ago.

The church’s Advent season runs counter to the secular holiday season that is going on all around us at the same time. So how do we change our lives so that we keep Advent this year? Maybe more importantly to ask— do we even want to change?

The secular holiday season— despite some of the obvious criticism, like commercialism, materialism, busyness, and so forth— has a lot to recommend it. Why would we want to check out and live differently from our culture? Why would we aspire to be still, do less, and connect more with God and one another? Let me give you an illustration that helped me as I thought about this.

How many of you wear glasses or contact lenses? How many of you really, really need them (i.e., you can’t see much or function well without having them on or in)? That’s me—without my glasses, not only can’t I drive, but I can’t read well, watch TV, or recognize people at a distance of much over five feet. I am helpless and clueless without my glasses.

Now for us in this category, have you ever misplaced your glasses? I don’t do it very often— I usually carefully put them in the same place every night so I know where to find them

the next day. But the other night, I failed to do that and I couldn't find my glasses the next day. I got up and started looking for them without much luck (*I was trying to be quiet, too, so I wouldn't wake up Lynn*).

I tried to do my normal morning routine, but everything was a little off. I would look for my glasses, and then try to make breakfast or read the paper or whatever, and then look for my glasses again. I just couldn't quite get on track. When I finally found my glasses, I was relieved and reoriented and I could begin my day anew.

Keeping Advent is like finding and putting on your glasses. Throughout our lives and over the course of the prior year, it is easy for our vision to start to fail us, so to speak. We may see things in our lives less clearly and therefore not stay on track with how we want to live—and with how God wants us to live. It is easy for us to forget God and go about our lives doing what we think best without praying or observing or reflecting or consulting with faithful people who can help us to really see and live faithfully.

It is easy for us to lose our focus and build up little offenses into big grudges so that we have a hard time forgiving and being kind to people, even people we care about. It is easy for us to lose focus on what really matters in life according to our Lord-- justice and mercy and faith.

Instead we may focus on keeping a personal scorecard comparing our lives with other folks in so many areas--nicest cars, biggest home, brightest children, most important job, and on and on. When we can't see well, we may fall into these traps that make us feel lost and disoriented, like me without my glasses. Or even worse, we may be clueless about how lost and disoriented we really are.

That's how Advent can help us and reorient us to God and God's ways. It is like putting on glasses to see life differently. By taking time to slow down, and especially time to pray and observe, study and reflect, on the world and our lives, God's Spirit can help us see what really matters—beyond the little offenses in our lives; or how we measure up against some artificial standard of success.

By keeping Advent, we can see more clearly in three important ways:

First, keeping Advent helps us see God in the world around us. For example, we can use this season to open our hearts and expand our minds to see God in creation. We can see how God creates and sustains the universe, including black holes and dwarf stars and comets and things that human scientists have not even discovered yet. We can take time to read a book or an article about the universe and then go outside and watch the night sky. Advent can be a time for us to marvel at what God has done and continues to do as God sustains the universe.

Keeping Advent can help us to see ourselves. Over the course of the year, it is easy for our “self-vision” to become fuzzy and out of focus. We may be too busy or depressed or simply unreflective. Advent gives us a chance for that to change. By being still and praying and asking the Spirit and trusted advisors to help us, we can see ourselves more accurately.

From my experience, that sharper vision of myself can be both difficult-- and affirming. When I slow down, become still, and pay attention, some painful things often come to mind. It may be glimpses of when I have been petty or angry, envious or ambitious. Those glimpses are often gentle but piercing reminders that I am a sinner saved by grace. If I stay still and pray, then I can say with conviction, “You are right Lord. I am sorry.” And God’s grace can help me keep Advent by repenting and returning to the Lord.

That vision of who we are individually is not just focused on what is wrong with us, though. When we are still, the Spirit can also speak other gentle truth, reminding and affirming that we are made in God’s image. When we are still, the Spirit will remind us of when we have been kind and brave and faithful. Those good things are also part of us and let us know that God is still at work in us to help us be more like Jesus.

But that’s not all; by being still and taking time to watch and pray and reflect during this holy season, we are able to see our society differently. By practicing stillness, we can pay attention to human life as it is and not just what we tend to see when we wear our secular holiday “blindness” as portrayed in commercials and TV specials.

When we slow down and pay closer attention, we can see the people who are not keeping up with our hectic holiday pace. Like folks who are older and may be alone and sad at this time of year. Or people who have a hard time giving those special gifts that make their children’s Christmas morning. Or people in prison or nursing homes or in the military-- people who are forced to be away from loved ones, no matter the cause.

When we slow down and expect less than what the secular holiday culture tells us we need, we can see people we might otherwise be too busy to see and care about. And when we see differently, we can respond in big and small ways that change us as we connect with others.

We had the opportunity to see differently this week after the grand jury decision in Ferguson, MO. For those of us who were not there, Facebook served as a virtual public square in which we saw videos of peaceful demonstrations and uncontrolled riots. We could read comments expressing anger and frustration and defensiveness and rationalization. What did we see? What did you see?

This Advent and in the months to come, I plan to “have my glasses on” so I don’t just see what I have been trained to see from my perspective over many years. Instead I want to see from the other side of life-- alongside people who have been mistreated, disrespected, and

oppressed in our society for centuries. Many of us don't see what they see, frankly, what's often right in front of us.

This Advent, I invite all of us to try seeing differently. For when we finally see things we have not paid attention to before, and then come together faithfully with people who are different from us, we have the opportunity to see our Lord more clearly and see **his** vision for our world. Then with God's help, we can move forward with all our sisters and brothers to change our lives and transform our world as we wait our Lord's return.

Amen.