

[Readings: Is 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matt. 24:37-44]

Both political and economic theories presume that planning for the future is a good. A business should have a surplus of funds, saving up for a rainy day. A nation should regularly think through various scenarios related to armed conflict. One should be prepared for the worst, just in case it happens.

Christianity shares something in common with both political and economic theories. We Christians also see the merit in planning ahead, of developing a vigilant attitude toward the future. We have a sober view of life, the seriousness through which everything should be taken.

But unlike the politician or economist, we don't believe that good policy or theory will save us. For we're awaiting the Advent of Our Lord, keeping vigil for the coming of Jesus Christ.

The politician and economist believe falsely that their political or economic system will last forever. They don't see that every system, every nation will end. Christ is coming to judge the nations. And that includes our nation, our system, even our economy!

The First Sunday of Advent begins by awakening the Christian to the final judgment of the Word made flesh.

We're not the first people to long for the end. Israel hears in today's reading from the Book of Isaiah of the hope of peace. Every nation shall come to the mountain of the Lord. This unity will not be established through the sword or any human technology. It is the Lord alone who makes possible this unity.

Progress generally is a good thing. Once in a while, though, our progress is hampered by setbacks. Obstacles we had not anticipated. Unexpected problems. Confusion, uncertainty and even despair. That's when it's time for us to go mountain climbing! Now, I don't mean literally. Look at this fine specimen of physical fitness. Mountain climbing? I mean spiritually.

Advent is a time for spiritual mountain climbing. In the time of the prophet Isaiah, the mountain top is where God lived. "The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain." You cannot get higher than God.

You cannot be smarter than God. We go mountain climbing so that God may instruct us in God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths. We walk out of the darkness and into the light of the Lord. We emerge from life's shadows and crevices to the splendor and radiance of the summit of God's mountain. There is where we have a sacred encounter with the God of the Universe and the best version of ourselves.

Have you ever had such an experience, a mountain-top experience? Where you encountered God in a profound way? Where Jesus let you know that He was and is near you in your deepest, darkest experiences of life and faith? I have been blessed to have had three such experiences in my younger years. This is part of the meaning of the four weeks of Advent. And it is different from the six weeks of Lent. Lent is a time for repentance. Advent is a time for preparation.

How do we prepare? We beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks. These words are inscribed in the main lobby of the United Nations Building in New York City. The challenge is to take our capacity for war and violence and transform it into a means of outreach, dialogue and assistance, as Pope Francis reminded us during his recent pilgrimage to Japan.

As St. Paul says in today's Second Reading: we wake from our spiritual sleep, we throw off those sinful deeds of darkness and put on the armor of Christ.

Relying entirely on God, keeping vigil, is no easy task. As we hear in the Gospel of Matthew, we creatures tend to get used to things staying the same. We eat and drink. We get married and bear children. The world, after all, will last forever, right? Sure, there's a God. But not a God who would ever bring a conclusion to a cycle of progress and profit.

But as Jesus preaches to us in today's Gospel, there is an end. We won't know when the end comes. But it's coming. The Son of Man will come to judge the nations and guess what! That's us.

For this reason, Christian preparation is different than that of the politician or the economist. When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, the end of the

world began. The economic and political cycles are meaningless before the son of David, the son of Mary, the son of God.

The irony of beginning Advent with apocalyptic fire is that Christmas has become part of the very political and economic cycles that Christ has come to interrupt. Gifts to buy. Trees to deck. Parties to hold.

But our Gospel should terrify us! In the middle of our mid-winter carnival, as we delight in our parties with co-workers, families and friends, the Lord may come. And he will come in judgment. What the Pentecostals and some Baptists call “the Rapture” and those who are “Left Behind.” Those called above go to Heaven; those “left behind” get incinerated for all eternity in Hell.

We Christians, therefore, must prepare in another way. Advent remains a season of preparing for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

The “coming of the Lord” which we anticipate during Advent has two rich meanings of the original Greek word, *Parousia*. Sounds like “Paris – See Ya!” It can mean the visitation of an important dignitary or politician, or it can mean God visiting a group of people with grace and gifts and salvation. Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

We pray in this season because we long for Jesus Christ to enter our hearts. We give from our financial blessings because Jesus Christ is present in the poor, entering our lives each day, and to support the work of the Church. We prepare because we long to desire God alone.

Advent is the season to prepare to perceive the coming of our Christ, to recognize His Advent in our midst. He will come to judge the nations; He will come to judge us.

Our task: recognize His presence even now in our midst.

That’s the vigil of the Christian.

So stay awake. COME, LORD JESUS! AMEN!