

First Sunday of Advent

Advent is a season of expectation. It is what we read in the bible, it is what we heard in the first lesson today, a remembrance of how God's people longed to see his face. It is the remembrance of God's people waiting for the return of Christ in glory to consummate his eternal kingdom. The church today is in a similar situation to Israel at the end of the Old Testament: in exile, waiting and hoping in prayerful expectation for the coming of the Messiah. Israel looked back to God's past gracious actions on their behalf in leading them out of Egypt in the Exodus, and on this basis, they called for God once again to act for them. In the same way, the church, during Advent, looks back upon Christ's coming in celebration while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the coming of Christ's kingdom when he returns for his people. In this light, the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" represents the church's cry during the Advent season:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

While Israel would have sung the song in expectation of Christ's first coming, the church now sings the song in commemoration of that first coming and in expectation of the second coming in the future. Fast forward to today and everything is about colors of green and red and silver and sometimes gold. Even the church gets caught up in colors, while the rest of the world is busy hanging the greens, we "deck the halls" with purple and blue. The poor old church is out of step as usual, unable, or perhaps unwilling, to catch the spirit of the holidays. The world wants brightly colored lights and jingle bells and we get out the dark blue and sing about how lost we are. Far from what the world expects, Advent begins not on a note of joy but with a searching inventory of our deep uneasiness and aching need. We dare not rush to Bethlehem and kneel at the manger until we spend some time here, in a church bathed in blue, admitting

that we do, in fact, need redemption and there is and will be darkness while starting at the end to reach the beginning of our Christian journey.

One of the blessings of Advent is that it counteracts the hype of the commercial Christmas madness, inviting us to a deeper and more fruitful spiritual renewal. One of two penitential seasons in the liturgical calendar for four weeks prior to Christmas, Advent prepares us for the great event of the incarnation. Advent calls us to meditate on the three "comings" of Christ: his advent at Bethlehem, his coming into our lives today, and his final coming at the end of time. The postures of Advent are hope, preparation and waiting. At the heart of advent season are many questions.

How do we hold on to hope when everything around us seems to be falling apart? How do we hope in God when we can't see any visible signs that God is present? How do we hum along to the endless soundtrack of happy Christmas songs playing over the loudspeakers of every place we go when inside our hearts are broken and bleeding, we can't see anything positive in the world around us, and we have lost any confidence we once had that things are going to get better? In our first reading from Isaiah this is the lament of the Israelites'.

I know it seems like a big downer to ask these questions as we begin our preparation for Christmas in the church, but the text from Isaiah reminds us that no matter what is going on with us personally, there are plenty of people out there, in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our pews, and in this world, who are not currently in an emotional place of hope, peace, and good will for all.

Isaiah was writing during a time of difficulty. The Israelites, newly returned to the Promised Land after more than a generation of captivity in Babylon, were facing an unknown future. The nations they had created before the exile now lay in ruins. Everything had to be rebuilt, repaired, replanted, and restored. While they were no doubt glad to be home, the life they remembered no longer existed. They needed some sort of sign that God was still with them and still the same. But instead of the heavens tearing open and God appearing, instead of mountains quaking in God's presence, God seemed to have disappeared. No one had come along to call on God's name. God had hidden God's face from them and left them alone to

contemplate their sin and regret. Jesus being the great teacher, he is aware of this scripture and to keep his disciples focused and not caught up in worldly things he engages in what might have seemed to his disciples a tirade.

Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 13:10 when he says, “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. I don’t know about you, but you have got to love a guy that can quote scripture like poetry and make it relevant to your conversation.

These are the words of Jesus, spoken to James and John and Peter and Andrew on the Mount of Olives as they sat there looking at the Temple, of which Jesus had said shortly before, there shall be left not one stone upon a stone. Jesus said these words as a promise and a warning, just when the disciples were pumped up and feeling good about how things seemed to be going. All the disciples had done was point out for Jesus the beauty of the Temple. All they had done was to comment on what a spectacular building it was. All they had done was to be glad about how glorious was the house of the Lord. And Jesus suddenly went off on them with all of this talk of how the Temple was going to be torn down so that not one stone would be left standing. When they pressed him to explain, he cut them down with all these terrible stories about wars and famines, and the desolating sacrilege and people needing to get out of the city so fast that they would have to leave all their possessions behind. But we already know, there was a purpose for his tirade.

We live in a time in history in which many people, in the United States and around the globe, are worried. We’re worried about the future—our own and, especially, that of our children. We are worried about the growing conflict in the nearby countries and contemplating the possibility of the countries involved pulling in the United States and Russia into nuclear war. We are worried about a disease spreading out of control, and the possibility of another terrorist attack. We have seen the consequences of devastating earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes. We have witnessed raging fires burning out of control, floodwaters washing away entire towns, and molten lava creeping toward a village in Hawaii. We are worried about the economy, and the environment, and the unemployment rate, and the elections, and the growing popularity of

sending those who came here seeking a better life back to places where certain death and imprisonment will occur, and an overall fear that immorality is on the rise. The whole world seems to be going to purgatory in a handbasket! We begin to wonder, “Does all of this add up to tribulation?” Is Jesus really coming again? Does God hear our cry?

As ministers of the gospel (which we all are) are we concerned with how many people sitting in our pews are feeling just like the Israelites after exile—lost, confused, uncertain, depressed, alone and afraid—and wondering why God never seems to show up for them, speak to them, or deliver them from their suffering and pain? How many people are facing the holidays alone? How many are dealing with the holiday cheer for the first time without their loved ones beside them—those whom they have lost to death, dementia, depression, dependency, or divorce? How many people are fighting just to get through each day, one day at a time? How overwhelming must the holiday cheer feel to those who are in the midst of trials and tribulations. And yet in our blue and purple colored churches it is business as usual. I imagine it is indeed hard to wrap our minds around the season of Advent being one of hope. But, it is! Every now and then (or perhaps more often than that), it might be hard to find hope in this world. Even in the midst of celebrating the birth of Christ, we may struggle to see the silver lining. At the height of all the revelry, it may be difficult to find a solid foothold or a ledge to hang onto. Advent is a season for hope—hope that empowers us and allows us to prepare, anticipate, wait, and watch for Christ to return. God's promises thread their way through the Scriptures and through history. As God's people, we will find hope in the hurts and disconnectedness of our lives. Remembering the birth of the savior of the world will help the hurt. Knowing from our past history, God has never broken a promise. We can have hope and be hopeful of better days to come.

Believing in the not yet come Christ will help us endure but we must be prepared for when he comes. We prepare by opening our hearts and allowing Jesus in. We prepare by loving others with the same care we provide for ourselves. We give God our full praise and worship all the time, not some of the time. We show ourselves as worthy through reading and learning God's word. We repent, ask for forgiveness and we forgive. Doing these things will surely give us an “A” report card for heaven.

For those who have served in the military, you might be familiar with the procedure of being on guard duty. You are exposed to this during basic training. Every member of the platoon gets to participate in shifts. You learn very quickly to be wise and utilize your time to sleep so you can stay awake when it is your turn to be on guard. You never want to be asleep when the drill Sargent comes by. Today's gospel is a reminder of the last posture for Advent which is, being on guard, being ready. To be ready is a lifelong task. We don't start getting ready when we see the heavens open and the son of man coming. Each day one step at a time, we begin to shape our lives so that they will be lives worthy of hearing, "well done my good and faithful servant." Our drill Sargent, Jesus demands us to keep watch because no one knows the time, the hour or the day. What we do know is, he is coming again. During this Advent we will remember and celebrate his birth, we will give thanks for the allowance of him to come into our hearts, and we will await his coming again in glory. Let us pray:

Our Heavenly Father, we worship you. You are the God who does awesome deeds that we did not expect! You have come down from on high, sending your precious Son Jesus to make your presence tangible. You work wonders for those who wait for you. Thank you for sending your Spirit to work in our life. Give us patience as we wait for the revealing of your glorious kingdom. May the gifts of ministry and offerings of love and concern we present daily serve your purposes as we await your coming in glory. Come soon, Lord Jesus! Amen. (Isaiah 64)