

A Sermon for Advent 1, Year C
December 3, 2006
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The Final Advent of God.

Happy New Year! That's right, even though we're only a few days into December, today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first day of the church's new liturgical year. And even though I've been ordained for nearly eighteen years, and a Christian *all* my life, I still have a hard time really getting into the spirit of the new church year.

However, when I was a child, and my father was serving in the Army and our family was stationed on the island of Taiwan (located a few miles off the coast of mainland China), I quickly learned that the Chinese New Year did not correspond to that to which I had grown accustomed. The Chinese New Year takes place on the second new moon after the winter solstice, which puts it in late January or the first half of February. And even though it seemed wrong, to a boy of six or seven, to be celebrating the new year five or six weeks after the rest of the world, I was quickly won over by their loud and colorful festivals, by the abundance of strange and exotic foods, and by more fireworks than I had ever seen in person.

Yes, like the Chinese, we Christians celebrate the new year at a different time than the rest of the world; though, obviously, for different reasons. We, too, march to a different drummer. And while the Chinese spend fifteen days celebrating their new year, we Christians spend four weeks, the four Sundays of the Season of Advent.

In case anyone needs a little reminding, I'll tell you that advent means "arrival" or "coming," and the Season of Advent gives us an opportunity to do two things. First, we prepare for the annual celebration of the birth of Jesus. Second, we are reminded that we are still looking for the final and glorious advent of the Son of God; to that day when he finally establishes his kingdom of justice and peace fully upon this earth. And even though Jesus told us numerous times that the kingdom of God was at hand, and in our midst, the season of Advent reminds us that this new kingdom has not been fully realized. It's almost here, but not entirely. But it's coming. And all the while, God is busy at work, and usually working through us, renewing his creation. All this reminds me of part of a prayer that we offer up on every Good Friday:

... let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord ...

In fact, the second to last verse in the New Testament (Revelation 22:20) gives voice to this advent expectation: After Jesus says "Yes, I am coming soon," the author of the Revelation responds by saying "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

This Season of Advent is all about the final advent of God, and our readings this morning point to that final event. They point to that time when, according to the prophet Zechariah, “the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.” And in the reading from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul prays that God will “strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” And in the reading from Luke’s gospel, Jesus describes “the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

So, in addition to welcoming in a new liturgical year, let us also pause to ponder the meaning of, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” For this is at the heart of our belief in Jesus as Savior, and in this belief is our eternal hope.

Our first reading today is from the book of the prophet Zechariah, who had a short career. His prophecies were made over a period of only two years. His family, which included priests, had recently returned from a hard life in an exile that had lasted about 70 years. The people of Israel were tired and discouraged, and had returned to their land only after Cyrus, the King of Persia, allowed them to return to their homeland. But not far away, a new conqueror, a man we know as Alexander the Great, was advancing on the Persian Empire. Zechariah believed that Israel stood at the eve of the messianic age, and he encouraged the rebuilding of the Temple in preparation for the arrival of the Messiah. Zechariah delivered a message of hope to a group of dispirited people who felt they were about to face more difficult times. It is at bleak times like these that hope-filled prophecies of salvation are proclaimed by God’s messengers. And so it was with Zechariah.

In our second reading, Paul offers up a prayer for the Christians living in Thessalonica. He has become aware of their concern over the fact that some of their members have died before Christ has returned, and they are afraid that those who had died will be excluded from the glory of the Lord’s coming. Now we have to remember that, in those days, Christians believed that the advent of the Lord – a time which they called the day of the Lord – would come at any moment. And this expectation was a source of hope and confidence for a people who were marginalized and even killed for their beliefs. And so, Paul prays that God will increase their love for each other and all people; for it is in such an abundance of love that will truly prepare them, and make them holy, for God’s advent. And this prayer shows us the importance of maintaining a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood as the means by which we prepare ourselves to greet the coming Lord. In other words, this is a prayer of hope, given in a time of hopelessness.

And given the state of our world today – with wars and conflicts and misunderstanding at almost every corner – the language of these two readings seem to take on a heightened sense of urgency. With everything we hear in the news, it’s hard to escape the feeling that life is neither safe nor secure. And yet, no matter where we may find ourselves, one thing is certain: Our hope is in the advent of the Word Made Flesh, Jesus the Lord.

For Christians everywhere, the Season of Advent affords us with an opportunity to reflect on the journey we've taken this past year, to set goals for the coming year, and begin, with a renewed sense of hope, on the next chapter of our faith journey.

Therefore, this is a good time to take stock not only of the accomplishments we've enjoyed, but also of the challenges we've faced. How have we responded to God's call to ministry in the past twelve months? How did we express our faith in a living God? Was it only through worship, or did it also include life-affirming actions? Where did we fall short, and what are we going to do about that? And, where did we succeed, and how can we build upon that? It's like that bumper sticker that reads, "Be patient; God isn't finished with me yet." Just as the kingdom of God is in our midst, but not entirely, the renewal that God is perfecting in each of us is still "in progress."

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of a time when people try to understand the signs they see in nature, and "faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." And yet, that reading ends with the parable of the fig tree, whose sprouting leaves are the sign of an upcoming season of growth and life that springs forth, and which stands in contrast to the starkness and death of winter. And the message in all that is this: In those times when life leaves us feeling hopelessly lonely, and our arrogant independence provides us little or no comfort or answers, there can spring forth, like a fig leaf at the end of winter, new life and renewed hope.

And the lesson we are to take away from this is that despair and hope go hand in hand. God allows us to bring together the full despair of reality with the unbridled hope of faith. In other words, in the midst of life, and the many events that evoke feelings of despair, God plants the seed of hope in a bright future; a future in which God's advent is realized in our own lives, if not in the world. And therein lies our hope, and therein is our faith nurtured and finds growth. Remember, faith is not a vaccine that prevents bad things from happening to good people. Rather, faith is the seed that brings forth new life and hope out of a soil of pain and desolation. And this is the message of the final advent of God.

As the Psalmist wrote, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth." This is God's call to us this Advent season. And so we can sing that great Advent hymn:

"O come, o come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
who mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee O Israel!"

And this is our hope and our faith: In the name of Jesus Christ, who was and is and is yet to be. Amen.