

November 30, 2014, First of Advent

Here we are, the first Sunday in Advent. This is the start of a new year in the Church; we are busy people with many other calendars to follow, the Julian calendar year, the New Year marked by our birthday, fiscal year, school year, not to mention the many seasons of our lives, from sports to weather. In Los Angeles we had four seasons, sunny and 72, earthquake season, brush fire season and the mudslide season. I have subsequently learned upon my arrival at St John's that there are only two seasons here, the season that you sail and winter... Each new-year, each new season has its own characteristics, expectations, and rhythms. We are starting a new year today as well as a new season, the season of Advent, which has its own purpose, rhythm and spirit.

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation, as the Church readies itself to not only celebrate the arrival of Christ in his incarnation, in his first advent; we look ahead to his second and final advent. We talk about the various sacraments of the church in terms of their outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. I think we can use this understanding to look at Advent. We have some of the outward and visible signs before us here and through the readings appointed for today, passages that speak to the inward and spiritual graces of the season. It is important to look at the outward and visible signs and the inward and spiritual grace of Advent, as a way to better understand and make meaning of the weeks leading up to the celebration of our Lord's birth and his anticipated return.

The word, Advent, comes from the Latin word, "adventus" meaning to arrive. It is a season that consists of four Sundays, and marks the beginning of a new liturgical year. The Season of Advent begins on the 4th Sunday before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. The observance of Advent originated in France during the 4th Century. Over the next 200 years the duration of the season varied from four to seven weeks until a 6th C Bishop of Rome set the season at 4 weeks. In these ancient times Advent was strictly observed whereby every Christian was required to attend church service and fast daily.

The mood of Advent is expressed in the liturgical color, purple. In the past, it was a color dye that was produced at the greatest expense. Purple was the traditional color of a king's robe. Used as well during Lent and Holy Week, it is a color of suffering, repentance, and dignity.

The Advent Wreath we see here today is another recognized symbol of Advent. The wreath is made of a circle of evergreen branches laid flat, a symbol of the endless nature of God's love for his people—the greening is a symbol of hope.

On this day, the First Sunday in Advent we light the first purple candle which is the candle of hope and in some traditions prophecy, reminding us that God foretold the coming of His Son. The Second Sunday in Advent we light a second purple candle, the candle of peace and in some traditions it is called the Bethlehem Candle, because it reminds us of God's preparation of a manger for the birth of His Son in Bethlehem. On the Third Sunday in Advent we will light an additional candle, the rose candle that is called the candle of Joy and in some traditions the Shepherds' candle. It reminds us of the shepherds who were the first people to see Jesus. The fourth and final Sunday in Advent we will light the Angel's Candle, reminding us that the angels announced the good news of our Savior.

Finally we arrive at Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, when all the candles, including a white candle in the center, Christ's Candle are lit. This candle celebrates his birth and the Light he brings to illuminate our path, to bring light into the very darkness referenced in today's Gospel reading. All five candles will continue to be lit in services until Epiphany Sunday. The advent wreath directs our attention to the anticipation of the coming of a Messiah, a message woven through the Hebrew Scriptures.

Typically, like the Season of Lent there are no flowers decorating the church. Since Advent is not part of the Christmas season itself, we, as Episcopalians, do not sing Christmas hymns, or use Christmas readings in worship until December 25th. Christmas Day marks the first day of the Christmas season.

Not only do the readings today speak to the tension of their time and early audience, they speak to our time and this season with as much force. These readings also speak to the inward and spiritual grace of this Advent season and serve as a guide for us, to not only live into the next few weeks, but to better live our faith in Christ.

We are to yearn for our Lord's presence in this season. **The Psalm** appointed for today tells us that the people of Israel were desperate, hungry for God whilst they endured the spirit crushing experience of occupation and for some, exile. "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine that we may be saved." "Show the light of your countenance." We too need to be hungry for him now, to cry out like the Israelites did then.

Advent is about expectations—we are told he will return. Sometimes we just want God, like in the passage from **Isaiah** to just tear open the heavens and come down with all the cosmic drama; to melt the earth as described in Peter's 2nd Letter. I have had days where I have felt this—we all do from time to time. This Davidic like rescue was a vision held, especially in times of suffering, by people back then. This would be the case of the exiles Isaiah was prophesying to during the Babylonian captivity.

The Gospel reading speaks of a cosmic event, not unlike what the book of Daniel describes. These are descriptions of events not intended as specific or literal events, rather they allude to the Hebrew Scriptures which the Gospel audience would have been familiar with. We can look to the reading from Isaiah to see the OT understanding of what a Messianic arrival would look like. But Mark has a different understanding of end-times he shares with us.

We are instructed to both prepare for imminent apocalypse while also being told to hunker down and prepare for the long-haul, certainly a mixed message. If a time is known only to God, then no one can expect a warning, including us. Mark believes the looking for signs to be a distraction. We have enough things to focus on, according to Mark. He also warns us against the false Messiahs that will come and that there will be persecution for proclaiming the Good News why we live in waiting.

The Gospel reading not only reaffirms a return, what is important here is what we are to focus on, how we are to spend our time until that day arrives. Mark offers us through a brief parable of the fig tree, that Jesus will return—a counter point to his earlier reference to the cursed and withered fig tree. This time the fig tree offers an assurance of hope in Jesus' return with a healthy tree that will bud and leaf out, that the fruit of summer is near, his return is near.

Again, Mark attempts to reassure the reader that despite the destruction of the temple and the persecution endured by those that proclaimed the good news and despite the uncertainty of his return, God is still with us.

God is faithful to us, according to Paul and that God has equipped us with all we need while we wait, while we prepare for his return. We are told that God will strengthen us to the end. Spiritual gifts are something that Paul talks at great length in his First Letter to the Corinthians but we will save that for another time. In Paul's message to the people of Corinth he suggests cogently that we are to carry on using our gifts wisely and to be mindful of the noise of life.

Perhaps this is an invitation. So in this season we are invited to take stock of our spiritual gifts, what God has given us that bolster our spirit while we journey, while we proclaim the Gospel. We can also take stock of our growing edges, our areas in need of attention through benign neglect or oversight. For we have not arrived yet. More is to be learned, more is to be revealed by God.

Returning to Mark again we conclude this reading with a parable admonishing us to "keep awake." Those servants responsible for the house must continue in their duties, to maintain the estate while their master is away. They are to stay awake, to attend to their responsibilities, keeping on doing what they do. Keeping on with their work and employing their gifts will please their master, for they know not his return and there is surely judgment if they do not. The take away for us is to lean into our God given gifts, trust in the Lord, and most

of all keep watch! Stay awake, don't abandon faith, and don't give up. God has given us the spiritual gifts, as detailed in Paul's Letter, to see us through this life.

The readings speak a unified Advent message. We are to long for God, to prepare our self and to use our gifts responsibly. And to remember most of all that our Savior will come again!

So how do we live out this Advent message that God in Christ is coming to the world again. The Message of Advent is to "prepare." The Lord is coming whether the world is ready or not, whether we are ready or not. For those ready for his coming, it means being in the kingdom eternal. The past month many of the readings in the Gospel of Matthew drew our attention to this important task of preparation.

We tend to do a better job of grounding ourselves in the season of Lent then we do during Advent. We will read Lenten devotionals; we might attend a Taize service, walk the stations, and most importantly engage in the age-old Lenten discipline of fasting or to give something up like red meat, spirits, or cigars. Or perhaps we take on a discipline like volunteering. Just as we prepare in Lent for the Passion of Christ, his death and Resurrection, we prepare for his incarnation and his eventual return. My modest efforts to honor the season and not come off to others as being a monumental holiday buzzkill include going on a brief retreat, if I can, and be more disciplined in my reading of Scripture— both suggestions came from a Spiritual Director years ago.

When I could, while living in Los Angeles I would drive to the Grand Canyon where I would spend a few days in Advent on retreat in preparation for the Christmas season. The 8 hour drive was followed by a hike down and a couple of days staying by the Colorado River at Phantom Ranch. It was a place free from the seasonal vibrations; I was less encumbered by my life that existed at and beyond the rim of the Canyon. It was my time, brief time, to take stock. When things now get frantic I transport myself to that place. Another visible sign for me has been to look to Scripture. The BCP has scripture prescribed for each day of Advent starting on p.936. Sometimes small victories are the best victories or at times, the most realistic. This holds true for finding a manageable discipline for Advent. We can get so preoccupied with the outcome, the finish line, the end-result, the pay-off, Christmas Day that the very best of life will pass us by.

I am not suggesting that we turn Advent into Lent. Rather to try to employ some of the same deliberateness. Treating this time as a way to enter into the next calendar year seems important—moving in a way and direction that is pleasing to God. Often, how we start something is how we end it. Advent is a time for critical self-reflection. It denotes a quiet time for watching, waiting and praying for Christ to come again both personally and universally. Let

us use these visible symbols of purple linen, candles, readings, and the greenery to remind us of the purpose of these next four weeks.

This time before the season of Christmas is a time to try to tune our ear and our heart to what Advent can be—to live more fully into the season and to live more fully into the Gospel Life that we are called to live.

AMEN