

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 3, 2017
First Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7
I Corinthians 1:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

For both casual and serious observers alike, today is a day of transition in the life of the church. The colors of our altar furnishings have changed, and the sanctuary is marked by the presence of the Advent wreath and Advent candles. The beginning of the service was marked by our prayer for God to intervene in history to bring salvation and redemption to his people, as we joined with God's people of old in praying the "O Antiphons."

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, traditionally regarded as the beginning of the liturgical, or church, year. The foundation of the liturgical year is the conviction that eternity has invaded time. More specifically, God has acted decisively *in history* to save and redeem a people. God's activity has its supreme focus in Jesus Christ -- his birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus came to undo the curse of sin on both God's Creation and God's creatures, and he will come again in glory to complete God's saving agenda for both. As we mark time through the church year -- especially during the next 6 months or so -- all that God has done in the past and all that he is yet to do in the future will be

brought into the present through the sacred actions, symbols, and words of worship.

Advent is the *chronological* beginning to all of this. The term “Advent” means “coming” or “arrival,” and because it precedes Christmas, it can be easy to think that Advent is exclusively the time to focus on the coming of the child at Bethlehem.

But in reality, the primary focus of Advent is on the future coming of the Risen One, who will judge wickedness and prevail over every evil. Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God.

It may seem a contradiction that the *beginning* of the church year focuses our attention on the *end* of time and the end of things, but in reality it is not. For when we speak of the “end” of things, we do not speak just about chronology and the end of time. We use the word “end” in the sense of ultimate *goal* or *purpose*. As Eugene Peterson says: “Calendars and clocks tell us what time it is, but they do not tell us what the time is for.”

So Advent is the time each year when we are called to remember “what time is for.” History is moving toward a *goal*, an *end*, when God’s purposes for the world will be fully realized at Jesus’ second coming. This, in fact, is what our lectionary texts have been preparing us for in the past few weeks.

The Advent season calls us to balance emotions and actions that are in creative tension. On the one hand, Advent calls us to prepare with great humility for an imminent arrival which is getting closer every day. It calls on us to search our hearts and to acknowledge how deeply we need God in our lives and in our world. It calls on us to acknowledge our sinfulness and our need of a savior.

Isaiah and the Psalmist point us clearly to this reality. Both of these texts are laments, where the community comes before God in a crisis to pour out its collective heart and to plead for God's action and intervention. Isaiah speaks on behalf of the people and confesses that their best efforts at obedience and righteous living are but "filthy rags." We are like autumn leaves, he says, and our sins carry us away.

But at the same time, Advent calls on us to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to open our lives to God's saving presence. The familiar refrain in the Psalm is "restore us, O Lord; shine the light of your countenance on us, and we shall be saved." And Isaiah says, "You welcome those who cheerfully do good, who follow godly ways."

So, on the one hand, our Advent preparation is *humble*, and it is *penitential*. This is part of the reason why one of the colors is purple, symbolizing penitence and repentance. Next week we will hear John the Baptist calling on us to repent, to turn our lives and our focus toward God.

But on the other hand, our preparation is also *joyful* and *celebrative*. Our Advent wreath and candles symbolize this dimension. Each of the four Advent candles symbolizes one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (hope, joy, peace, and love). It is not coincidence that the fourth candle will be lit at the darkest time of the year (the Winter solstice). For we are anticipating the coming of the Light of the world into the darkness of the world's misery and sin, and this fills our hearts with hope and with joy.

So, Advent is both a *penitential* season as well as a *joyous* one. In the short term, we look with joy to the coming birth of Christ and the appearance of the Light of the world. In the longer term, we are forced to consider our own condition, to imagine the alarming possibility of permanent darkness without new light.

Finally, Advent is also about *patiently waiting*. In a culture where we are taught that we should have everything we want and that we should have it immediately, Advent reminds us that the ways of God are not our ways. God is at work to bring about His purposes, but in ways that will surprise us and shatter our expectations.

This is the message of Jesus in the Gospel lesson. We don't know the time or the hour of Jesus' return, so we are to wait *patiently* and *actively* by being about the work we've been given to do. We must remember that God is a God who

keeps his promises. But God is also a God who loves surprises. Rather than focusing on the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell, we should remember that we are stewards of a house who've been given a job to do. There is justice to be pursued. There is peace to be sought and worked for. There is hatred to be overcome.

And so we can join our hearts and voices to that of the poet who said:

Send your Word, O Lord, like the rain, falling down upon the earth.

Send your Word.

We seek your endless grace,

With souls that hunger and thirst, sorrow and agonize.

We would all be lost in dark without your guiding light.

Send your Word, O Lord, like the wind, blowing down upon the earth.

Send your Word.

We seek your wondrous power,

Pureness that rejects all sins, though they persist and cling.

Bring us to complete victory; set us all free indeed.

Send your Word, O Lord, like the dew, coming gently upon the hills.

Send your Word.

We seek your endless love,

For life that suffers in strife with adversities and hurts,

Send your healing power of love; we long for your new world.

(Yasushige Imakoma)

As we embark upon this Advent season, let us do so with patience, with humility, with the knowledge that we need a mighty visitation of God in our lives,

in our homes, in our world. Let us open our hearts anew to his coming. And let us look forward with joy to all that his coming brings.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.