

ALL SAINTS ANGLICAN CHURCH
Springfield, Missouri
Common Revised Lectionary Year B
Advent 1
John H. Simmons
November 30, 2008

Psalm: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Old Testament: Isaiah 64:1-9
Gospel: Mark 13:24-37
Epistle: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Father, bless us today as we celebrate this First Sunday in Advent. Let us reexamine ourselves and our relationships with one another and with You. We look back to Your Son's first coming as we also look forward to His return. In the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

I was out in the country a few days ago. It was a beautiful day, the sky was clear and the sun was warm. It almost felt like summer. But the sounds and smells were more like autumn. There was the distant honking of geese flying south and the scent of burning leaves in the air. The day was very much like Advent.

We are looking back as we also look forward.

Isaiah, from the perspective of the eighth century before Christ, spoke with awe of the power of God, looking to the future incarnation of the Lord and to the messianic age:

“For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for them that waiteth for him.”

He continues, speaking of his own age,

“But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people.”

Isaiah understood that the God of infinite power was also our intimate Father, the one who forms us for His purposes. Isaiah also understood that he lived in a kind of duality, looking forward to the eventual fulfillment of God's promises but, at the same time, seeking God's will in his own day.

The Psalmist wrote,

“O Jehovah God of hosts, How long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people? Thou hast fed them with the bread of tears, And given them tears to drink in large measure.”

But in his sorrow he also made this cry,

“Quicken thou us, and we will call upon thy name. Turn us again, O Jehovah God of hosts; Cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved.”

With those words he affirmed again that life itself comes from God and it is God who revives us in times of sorrow and distress, in times of discouragement and sadness. He created us and He sustains us.

Advent is sometimes called a “little Lent.” It is a season in which we are called upon to pay special attention to our lives and our relationships with one another and with the Father through Jesus Christ, to reexamine our spiritual health and pray for renewal. It is also a season when the church turns its attention in a special way to prophetic teaching.

From the perspective of Isaiah and of other Old Testament prophets, we are called to look again at the events of the Lord's first coming. We look forward to the celebration of the Nativity and God's amazing gift to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, to His birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. We also look forward to the Lord's promised return. We proclaim this truth each time we come together at the Lord's table: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.”

Paul wrote to the Corinthians concerning this same God, known to the patriarchs and prophets as I AM and to us as Immanuel, God with us,

“Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: So that ye fall behind in no gift as we wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”

We look forward to the Lord's return, but not without grave concern for all who do not know Jesus as Savior and Lord, who do not know the love of the Father expressed in grace and forgiveness by the blood of Christ.

Mark's Gospel records that Jesus said,

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great

power and glory. And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven.

“Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When her branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near: So ye in like manner, when ye shall see these things come to pass, know that it is nigh, even at the doors.

“Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done. Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.

“Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of Man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch.

“Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.”

Isaiah lived in treacherous times, as did Paul and as did Jesus Himself. We also live in dangerous times. There has not been at single day since Adam sinned and death came into the world that evil has not striven to overcome good, when Satan's rebellion against God has not continued. We see the sin of this fallen world all around us and know things are getting worse, not better. Evil abounds, as we were told it would, but for us, in the Church, in the Kingdom, we must claim another standard than the world's standard, another path than the world's path.

In Luke's (Ch. 21) account of the Olivet Discourse, he says:

“Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that you may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

I began by telling you about my walk in the country the other day. Let me go back to it again. In the warmth of the sun I remembered summer. In the calls of migrating geese and the smell of burning leaves I was reminded that winter is at hand. Looking back even as we look forward is a reality in our lives. Advent reminds us of Jesus' first incarnation even as we look for His victorious return.

If you look for a reference to Advent in scripture you will not find it but it has been celebrated in the Christian Church since at least the fourth century, as the beginning of the traditional Christian Year.

We sometimes demean tradition, remembering the words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel (7: 13) that we can

nullify the Word of God by our traditions. But we must also remember that the final judgment of any practice, whether old and traditional, or new and innovative, must be based on one attribute alone: does it or does it not point us to the reality of Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord?

Advent can be a season of great benefit if we keep it correctly. To do so we must turn our hearts again to the Lord and inquire of Him. We must look back with wonder and awe to those great things which God has done as we also look forward to the fulfillment of His promises.

In all that we must examine ourselves and acknowledge God's mercy. This is an action we must take every day of our lives, but one which is especially fitting to this season. We, by God's love and grace, have been lifted out of the mire of this world and seated in heavenly places with Christ, who is enthroned at the right hand of the Father.

We are aliens in this world, not illegal aliens, perhaps, but strangers looking, as Abraham looked, for another city, another country, where our true citizenship rests.

So as we see the seasons change from autumn to winter, as we see the light of the sun grow dim and the length of the days shorten, as we hear the call of geese flying off to warmer places, let our hearts be turned to thoughts of God and His mercy, remembering the promises of a messiah given to ancient prophets and our own blessed hope for Christ's return.

Advent is about self-examination as we also look beyond ourselves to the eternal. Advent is about looking back as we also look forward. It is about remembrance and about hope. It is about self examination, not in the light of our former guilt but in the light and love and grace of our redemption by the sacrificial life and work of Jesus Christ.

On this first Sunday of Advent we mark the beginning of the new church year. Let us reexamine ourselves, our lives and our relationships, relationships with one another within the Body of Christ, and our relationship with God the Father through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Let us ask again for the renewal of our lives by the work of the Holy Spirit. And, finally, let us look beyond ourselves to the entire body of Christ as we affirm again our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.

Amen.