

Holy Spirit Church – St. John’s & St. Michael’s
The First Sunday in Advent
Year A
November 27, 2016

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44



Cathedral of Notre Dame de Reims, France
Evening lights at the 800th Anniversary in 2011

The Advent Season

“Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and put on the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life”
(The Collect for the First Sunday of Advent, Book of Common Prayer)

Next to my desk at home, I have a framed picture of the words from the collect we read for today – given to me by a dear friend at a particularly difficult time in my life. This collect has always been an inspiration for me, along with the passage from Romans from which it was drawn, and the one from Ephesians about putting on the “whole armor of God.” Together they have brought me some comfort on dark nights. I find myself attracted to the image of light – and ready at any moment to avoid darkness.

Another source of my Advent reflections is a meditation by Herbert O’Driscoll, Anglican scholar and theologian, which presents a very different view of this collect. O’Driscoll begins his short essay by comparing human life to a forest – a single living organism with patches of bright light and areas of deep darkness. He writes:

“Mysteriously my light and my darkness is one. I am not two beings, one wonderfully full of light, the other a rather horrible pool of darkness! In fact my wholeness as a human being depends on my bringing my whole self before God and offering its light and its darkness. Then I find wonderful things can begin to happen. Reconciliation can take place. Creativity can begin to flow. I begin to discover the glorious, liberating, and energizing truth that God can use both my light and my darkness.”¹

Throughout the centuries, Christians have tried to follow Christ – to live as He lived, to reach out to those who were outcast and despised in society, to live in communion with God, and to preach and teach about God’s kingdom. To achieve this, many different types of communities and spiritual practices were developed over the last two thousand years. Some followed the contemplative model, some evangelical, some charismatic or pentecostal, some withdrew to isolated communities and lived in the holiness tradition, and others engaged actively in the world offering compassion and speaking of justice in a prophetic tradition. The desire of all was to meet Christ on their path – to be made new in the engagement with God and others who were fellow pilgrims on the way.

Advent is a time when we think about the coming of Christ. At the beginning of the Advent season, we always read the lessons about the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. So, the lessons today are filled with prophecies of the future age and the end of time.

The early Church expected an immediate return of Christ and therefore lived life on the edge. The persecutions of the early Christians encouraged a simplicity of life which anticipated death at any time. They stood in the present age reflecting the glory of the age to come. Throughout all the centuries Christians proclaimed the second coming of Christ, and at most times expected that the end would be in their lifetime. We appropriated the Old Testament visions of “the Day of the Lord” and applied them to the promise of the return of Christ. And not until modern times has the sense of immediacy of the second coming been lost – and even then, not in all churches.

By some accounts, the end should have already happened. In the eighteenth century, Archbishop James Usher, Primate of Armagh, predicted that the earth would come to an end on October 23, 1996. This was based on his careful study of Scriptures and the best astronomy of the time. It was later adjusted to November 4, 1996 to take account of the difference between the Julian and the Gregorian calendars – and for the cynics - 1 day

¹ O’Driscoll, Herbert, Prayers for the Breaking of Bread: Meditations on the Collects of the Church Year, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass., c. 1991, p. 2.

before the 1996 Presidential election in the US.² Although we find this mildly amusing 20 years after the time certain, there is no doubt that we all reflect periodically on when the world will end – and as earthquakes, famine, flood, and other natural disasters strike around the world, many will say that the signs in the heavens and on the earth should give one pause.

For most of us, however, the immediacy of the end of the world is something we don't think about often. Perhaps when there are global disasters – like tsunamis or earthquakes or floods or famine – we reflect on the prophecies of end times – but from our vantage point, the power of this prophecy has diminished after 2000 years.

I had occasion several years ago during Advent to bring friends of mine from the local Baptist Church to St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church (in San Diego) for a workshop on evangelism. In the course of the evening we walked into the church and they were stunned to see the altar hanging for Advent which said "Maranatha" - Aramaic for "the Lord is coming." This bold statement of belief in the coming of Christ at the end of time was hardly their impression of the Episcopal Church.

Despite our confidence in the continuation of the world as it is, our prayers and creeds reflect the ancient teachings:

- In the Lord's prayer we pray "thy kingdom come on earth"
- In the Nicene Creed we state "he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end"
- In the Eucharistic prayer we affirm: "We remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, and we await his coming in glory."
- And in the collect for today "that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal..."

Despite this disconnect in what we say and what we think, there is the inevitable truth that the end will come for each of us individually and for those whom we love. And that that day will be for each of us as cataclysmic as the dire prophecies of the end times. O'Driscoll comments as follows:

² Cathedral News, The Washington National Cathedral, "The Way Forward" by the Rev. Prof. Peter Gomes, Dec. 8, 1996.
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“Our culture does its best to prevent us from acknowledging this fact. It has endless ways to keep our minds incessantly occupied with busyness. In that “last day” all my pathetic and obsessive busyness will be swept aside and I shall be made aware of “glorious majesty” confronted with things over which I have no control. This majesty will judge me; it will be the measure of who I have become. This majesty will have a face, and that face will be the face of the Christ whom I have met countless times in the guise of humility.”³

I have noticed that as we age, we become more interested in simplifying our lives, and less interested in acquiring more and more. As people approach the natural end of their lives, material goods are less important and time with friends, family and God becomes paramount. For those with a terminal disease priorities become very clear, and many of the things with which we clutter our lives are dismissed as irrelevant. Those who anticipate death live wholly in the present, ordering their lives in accordance with their spiritual needs.

I think all of us would live a little differently if we knew our lives would end at a time certain – this week, this month, or this year. I would like to challenge you today to bring this sense of the shortness of our lives into the Advent season – to reclaim the spiritual urgency of the early church, to simplify our lives, and to focus on what is really important.

In the bulletin there is a bookmark with a photograph of the Cathedral of Reims – one of the great French Cathedrals dedicated to the Virgin Mary, built (or in this case rebuilt) in the 1200s and set as an arc around Paris, on an exact outline of the constellation Virgo. At the celebration of its 800th anniversary, the Cathedral of Reims was lit up and seemed to me a great illustration of the metaphor of “putting on the armor of light.”

I’d like you to take out this bookmark now and a pen. As we make our way through Advent, I would encourage you to give three special gifts this year.

The first gift which I would challenge you to give is the gift of forgiveness. Jesus called us to forgive our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to turn the other cheek. We are exhorted to be reconciled one to another. If you thought that your life would end on Christmas Day, whom would you forgive?

- Someone who has hurt you – friend, family member, colleague?
- Someone who has treated you unfairly or betrayed you

³ O’Driscoll, Herbert, *op.cit.*, p. 3.
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- Someone who has made your life miserable

Now, I would like you to picture that person in your mind – and take the bookmark and write that person’s name or initials on the back. When you see this bookmark with the person’s name, pray for this person and for yourself that the Holy Spirit will enable you to forgive and be forgiven in the name of Christ. Then, I would like you to imagine exchanging the Peace with that person on Christmas Eve. This is the first gift.

The second gift is the gift of hope. One of the greatest gifts of the Christian church is that of hope – the hope that people can change, the hope that God comes among us, the hope of new life... With whom would you share the gift of hope, if you knew your life would end on Christmas Day?

- A stranger begging on the street
- A friend who has given up on life
- A friend or family member suffering from a terrible illness

Now, I would like you to picture that person in your mind – and take the bookmark and write that person’s name or initials on the back, or his/her location on a street corner. When you see this bookmark with the person’s name, pray for this person and for yourself that the Holy Spirit will enable you to share the hope and love of Christ. Then, I would like you to imagine bringing that friend with you to celebrate their new found hope on Christmas Eve. This is the second gift.

The third gift is the gift of faith. We are exhorted to spread the news of Christ to all the world. We are charged to evangelize and baptize. If we thought our lives would end on Christmas Day, with whom would we share the good news of Christ?

- A person who has never heard the story of Jesus
- A person who has never allowed Christ into his or her life
- A person who has left the Church and no longer shares his or her life with Christ.

I would like you to picture that person in your mind now – take the bookmark and write that person’s name or initials on the back. When you see this bookmark with the person’s name, pray for this person and for yourself that the Holy Spirit will enable you to share the good news of Christ. I would like you to imagine that person being baptized on Christmas Eve, or if he or she has fallen away from the church, being restored to the Body of Christ. Then, I would like you to imagine sharing Communion with that person on Christmas Eve. This is the third gift.

The Advent Season
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Now, take this bookmark home and put it – not in your Bible or your prayer book – but in your checkbook, or your wallet, or with your credit cards, or take a photo of it for your smart-phone, so that every time you buy something for someone else, or you plan your Christmas activities, you are reminded of the gifts we would give to ourselves and others if we thought that Christ would come again this Christmas Day. Forgiveness, hope and faith – these are the gifts which the Christian brings to the world while waiting for the Messiah to come again.

Let us pray:

Bright God of Advent: Blaze in our darkness.
Incinerate our iniquity. Light up our road.

Rekindle the ashes of our desires.
Rekindle in us your justice and love.⁴

Let your Spirit, wild as the wind, gentle as the dove,
Move within us and among us,
To enliven our worship, strengthen our faith
And send us out with anticipation and joy. **Amen.**⁵

⁴ Burgess, Ruth, editor, Candles & Conifers: Resources for All Saints' and Advent, "Bright God of Advent" (Ruth Burgess), Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow, Scotland, c. 2005, p.167.

⁵ Burgess, Ruth, editor, op.cit., "Send Us Out with Anticipation and Joy" (John Harvey), p. 183.