

Sunday, December 01, 2024
The First Sunday Of Advent

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Andrew C. Mead, *Rector Emeritus*
on
Jeremiah 33:14–16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13; Luke 21:25–36
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Advent Sunday 2024 Year C

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Let me begin by thanking the Rector for his invitation, from last spring, to preach on this Advent Sunday, the start of a new Christian Year. Some of my fondest memories of this great Sunday with its powerful music and hymns stem from services here at Saint Thomas.

The word, Advent, from the Latin, means coming, or more particularly, coming towards. This touches on one of the most basic truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, namely, that in Jesus, God is coming towards us, his kingdom is at hand, and to be ready we need to repent, which means turn towards him in response. “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

Most of us think of Advent as the time when we prepare for Jesus’s arrival as born in the stable at Bethlehem – our preparation to celebrate Christmas. True enough. But if we start there, at Christmas, and we work our way backward through the season, to where we are this morning, we see other forms of Christ’s coming towards us. For two Sundays, the mid-Advent Sundays, the season draws our attention to John the Baptist, the herald of Jesus’s ministry. And then at last – literally at last – we come to today, Advent’s first Sunday, which tells us that Jesus Christ is not only the Good News in this life, whether in his birth, or his ministry, but also at the end – our end and even the end of the world and of time as we know it. He comes to judge the world as God’s last word, to inaugurate God’s kingdom in its fullness. “Lo, he comes with clouds descending, once for our salvation slain.”

It is understandable that preparations for Christmas overshadow these other important themes of Advent. And I suppose today’s theme, The End, is the one people would most gladly skip over – with its apocalyptic images and the end of all things. But let me hold our attention right there. That’s what this Sunday is for.

Let me begin by getting up close and I’ll speak for myself so as not to make anyone else squirm. Not only will Jesus come to us, we will go to him. He will come to me; I will go to him in my own singular, personal death. I will lay down the burden of the flesh and see the Lord in his unveiled glory to render my account. In a couple years, God willing, I’ll be an octogenarian, and although I try to stay healthy, I have a sharpening sense about it all, that time is short while eternity is long. My appointment with the Lord becomes one of the most important thoughts in my daily prayers.

I notice that my contemporaries, including friends, increasingly are falling like the autumn leaves. That's the way it is at this stage on life's way. If the Lord called me home today as one of those falling leaves, I could not, according to Scripture, complain about being short-changed. "The days of our age are three-score years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to four-score years..." we get the psalmist's point: "so teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." *Carpe diem!* Seize the day! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

So if the Lord will shake the nations, as he says in today's Gospel, we are among the shaken as well. He shakes us out of our desire for false security. There is Good News in the midst of all this, the best news in the world, *that our true security is at hand*. We can take it from our first reading, from the prophet Jeremiah, who was not known for being an optimist, but who is accounted one of the greatest of the prophets. In his last sentence today, he gives us the heart of the Gospel of Christ and names our authentic security.

As Jeremiah sees his beloved nation of Judah and its holy city Jerusalem collapsing through its infidelities and injustices to its people, weakened to the point of surrender to the Babylonians who will destroy it and lead its people into a 70-year captivity, he receives a word of prophecy from the Lord. A righteous Branch will grow up within the remnant of the house of Judah, after Judah has been stripped of all its worldly pretensions.^[1] It is a prophecy of the Messiah, the Christ, and his redeemed remnant of followers, given five hundred years before Jesus of Nazareth's birth. At the heart of the prophecy is this last sentence in our lesson this morning which repeats a prophecy ten chapters earlier: "This is the name by which he – the Messiah – shall be called: THE LORD [IS] OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS." The Messiah, and his redeemed people, in him.

So it is that Jesus Christ is to stand before God as the representative goodness, the righteousness, the integrity, of his people, actually of all humanity. He is the Word of God made flesh; he is also the One True Human Being. The Son of God and the Son of Man. He is the ground we are invited to stand on. Jesus is our goodness, righteousness and integrity. My Judge is also my Advocate! Thank God! Our admittance into God's kingdom is not to be a matter of our merits outweighing our demerits. Besides, if God were to be extreme to judge such things, none of us could abide it. But Christ, God's beloved Son, has taken our place in this judgement, has died our death, and is risen and reigning on the other side in glory. As we sing in one of the great old Latin hymns, "When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers."

Jeremiah's prophecy gets to the heart of what Advent is about – in Christ's birth, in his ministry of healing and teaching, and in his return to judge the world. At Advent, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS comes to us to welcome us home into the life of God his Father, which is why he taught us to call God "Our Father." This is the Good News, the best news there is in this world. So trust and depend on Jesus. Keep at your prayers, your repentances, your thanks, your words and acts of love. You heard what Jesus said: Stay alert and watch.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost.

References

- 1 First at Jeremiah 23:5-6, for the Messiah; then again at Jeremiah 33:15-16, for the Messiah's redeemed people.
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