

Waiting For Today -- Advent 1C

Gracious Creator, in this Advent of expectation, draw us together in unity, that our praise and worship might echo in these walls and also through our lives. In this Advent of expectation, draw us together in mission, that the hopes within us might be the songs we sing: the melodies of our lives. In this Advent of expectation, draw us together that the paths of service we follow might lead us from a lowly stable to a glorious eternity with you. Amen.

Thanks be to God for this Advent, oh so old and always new, ever changing, ever true. Our stories this morning speak to us of the challenging and humbling but glorious experience of being in need, in need of God's loving care. They speak of what it feels like to acknowledge ourselves as ever to be hungry and parched until we bring ourselves to the table and the wellspring of God's love.

Just as in Lent, there is, of course an expectancy in Advent, that sees a great and momentous occurrence at season's end. But in Advent, it's harder to feel this as waiting when we seem to be celebrating Christmas the minute Thanksgiving is over. Some stores just say the heck with it and start their stampedes on Thanksgiving Day. We saw an ad yesterday that said, "Get ready for Xmas, come shop at 'so and so's.'" Shorthand shilling for manipulative merchants seems a far cry from joyfully announcing the holy festival Christmas once signified. Waiting during Advent sometimes seems more like revving up than contemplating holiness.

There is an irony to our waiting that we seem to overlook if we're not careful. We celebrate Jesus' coming into the World by the power of the Holy Spirit, but in order to celebrate, we

must know that He is already here. If we are to be Christians in thought word and deed, we are meant to always be aware of the Incarnation, always aware of the Passion, and always “Easter People” too, as the saying goes. So why set a day for Christmas at all? Why wait?

There are some practical reasons. Long about the darkest days of the year, it’s awfully nice to have something like Christmas to look forward to. The psychologists will tell you we tend to be glummer the grimmer the weather. Hence the symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder: SAD. Since time immemorial, human societies have recognized the winter solstice as a yearly pivot point and thus a cause for celebration. From now on, the days grow longer and the sun grows stronger; things start looking up. So it is no great mystery that, among the followers of Jesus, whose appearance was the great turning point of history, the season agreed upon for the commemoration of Jesus’ birth is now. If Christianity had spread southward first, instead of northward, Christmas would indeed come in July, or June anyway. Also, for a system that runs on commerce, it’s practical to have a reason to encourage buying. We know it is more blessed to give than to receive, but both are fun. Xmas in an advertisement, however, is probably too much fun to stand.

Lest we dismiss several reasons for having Christmas as secular and therefore vaguely sinful, or at least irrelevant to the God-fearing, we should bear in mind that ways and means of being happy – in moderation -- are very much good for our souls; they truly are part of God’s plan for us. But why must Christmas be holy too? With all these other reasons for Christmas, why are we here on this First Sunday of Advent wondering, talking and singing about the imminent arrival of God’s very self among us, the long-expected Jesus, the much-heralded One who will fulfill God’s promise made to Israel,

pluck our feet out of the net, and teach us the ways we should choose; who will come in a cloud to let us know our redemption is at hand?

Why indeed, if Jesus is always going to show up, why are we waiting? For one thing, patience and expectation are good practice. There are few subjects about which more ink has been spilled, more rhetoric spoken, more tales spun than the question of When: “How long, O Lord, will this go on?” “When will we be free?” The scholars say that St. Paul and the early Christians assumed that the final days and the return of Jesus in glory were practically upon them. Any minute now, things stood to get exceedingly hairy and all the fertilizer would hit the big fan in the sky. Jeremiah predicted it; Luke brought it into even sharper focus: There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. But it hadn’t happened then, and it hasn’t happened yet.

The Left-Behinders would have us believe that something is about to happen, really soon, for real this time, but they miss the point. Ask anybody in Sri Lanka or North Carolina if the waves and the sea have done any roaring lately. Ask anybody in Syria or Afghanistan if there are wars or only rumors of wars. Today especially, on the 30th Annual World AIDS Awareness Day yesterday, ask any of the 35 million people living with HIV whether there are plagues. Overwhelming percentages of those dying of AIDS are women and children in Africa and poor, marginalized people worldwide. Look at these things and wonder if the end times are somewhere in the unknown future, or if there might be another explanation.

Then Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you know that Summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the Kingdom of God is near.” Well the fig tree sprouts every year, God willing. Fig trees have been sprouting ever since Jesus uttered those words; they sprouted long before, too. Not only that, winds and waves and wars and plagues have been taking lives all along. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.” In other words, these are the good old days, but these are bad days too. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and the day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.”

Now we all know that believing in the love of God in Christ is not going to help you breathe if there’s a 40ft Tsunami over you. Jesus knew that too. He came here to show us what to do in the face of plagues and wars and waves and winds and fire. Jesus’ admonition to wake up and be God’s people is today’s business. For Jesus is always coming – every year, every day. We remind ourselves of this especially at Advent time, when our spiritual journey is heightened by the excitement of intentional waiting for the glory of Christmas. But we remind ourselves best by remembering who we are, people of love. What we are waiting for is the start of a new day, a day in which we have the joy of going about business as usual.

Today we begin a time of being particularly intentional about the ends we seek in life. C. S. Lewis once famously said, “Don’t waste time bothering whether you love your neighbor; just act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets: When you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love them.” He’s talking to us.

Once upon a time, back in the early days of the nation, it happened that one day, while the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session, a great storm blew up outside the windows of their meeting hall. The sky grew dark with terrible flashes of lightning and deafening thunderclaps. As the wind howled and the trees were straining and breaking, it started to hail and panes of glass began to crash into the room. The members of the House were understandably alarmed. Some of the more religiously volatile of their number began to assert that the final day was upon them. A group of these gathered around Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the House, demanding that he adjourn the session so they might go home and prepare themselves for the Judgment that was upon them. Without a pause, Davenport replied, "Gentlemen, the Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I should like to be found doing my duty. I therefore ask instead that more candles be brought to increase our light."

As many as there are kinds of birds and shells and trees and people in God's World, so many are the varieties of service and opportunities for neighbor love in each of our lifetimes. This Advent of expectation, the question is not, is Jesus going to show up, the question is, are we? "Therefore," so that we might better see the variety of opportunities before us, "let more candles be brought, to increase our light!"