

Advent 1, 2022

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

Happy Advent! Happy New Year! Today marks the beginning of Advent, the season when we prepare for the coming of Christ, the season of hope where we prepare for the birth of Jesus.

Last Sunday we celebrated Christ the King, which is the last Sunday of the Church calendar, and it was the end of Year C, as 3-year cycle of the Common Revised Lectionary designates. Today is the first day of Advent, the first day of the Church calendar and the beginning of Year A. So begins another 3-year cycle.

Last year I also had the good fortune to preach on the first Sunday of Advent. Some of you might remember that I spoke about Advent calendars, which had been a beloved tradition of my family since childhood. I had been fascinated by all the recent commercial Advent calendars that have appeared on the market, with an enormous range of products and treats to suit every possible taste, treats to be dispensed daily during the month of December. Not exactly in alignment with the liturgical Advent season, but well...close enough. I was a market's dream, and that fascination of mine led to an unfortunate episode. I had discovered an online company that advertised Advent calendars containing tiny bottles of one's favorite spirit—bourbon or scotch, wine, sherry, port, etc. Since my husband's birthday fell just before the beginning of Advent, and since he is a connoisseur of good

whiskeys, I had the “great” idea to get him a calendar with samples of “old and rare Scotch whisky.” It turned out that the product was not at all as it was advertised, in fact it was a scam. Surprise, surprise. First of all the company sent me a different product than the one I ordered—they sent a calendar with bourbon, not Scotch, and refused to exchange it. Okay, not the end of the world since my husband loves good bourbon as well. But on December 1st, as he began to open the little windows—and we eventually opened all the windows the first day—we discovered there was not a single bottle containing any spirits at all!!! Some of the little windows were completely empty, some contained small empty bottles, and the rest contained tiny holiday-themed “charms” of unclear value! The company was based in China and refused to give me a refund unless I paid for postage to send it back to Hong Kong, which would have cost much more than the original product. So, I appealed to PayPal, which I had used to purchase the order. And after several weeks and many emails back and forth, PayPal finally refunded me the entire cost of the order. My husband and I still laugh about the incident. End of story.

So much for the intersection of commerce and liturgy!!! No more commercial online Advent calendars for me.

In this morning’s Gospel, Matthew quotes Jesus telling us that he will return to earth after his death. Matthew is only one of two Gospels which tell the story of the birth of Jesus, the other one being Luke. The Gospels of Mark and John say absolutely nothing about the Nativity, not a single word. And the Matthew and Luke Gospels tell two very different birth narratives, but that is the subject of another sermon. My point is that Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus and

also talks about his return in the future. This is where we get the the second theme of Advent, the return—or Second Coming—of Jesus. These two Biblical themes are the heart of Advent: the Nativity and the Second Coming.

St. Paul also tells us that this is the time to await the coming of Jesus. Paul did not know Jesus during his lifetime, but he believed that he was summoned directly by the dead and risen Jesus to become his apostle and evangelist. As we know from the Book of Acts and from the Epistles, after Paul’s encounter with Jesus, he spent the rest of his life traveling all around the Mediterranean founding churches and converting non-Jews to his belief in Christ.

His letter to the Romans was written around 55 AD, at least 20 years after Jesus died. So this “coming of Jesus” would be a Second Coming, and one which Paul believed would happen in the near future, possibly during his own lifetime.

As Paul’s churches grew and gradually coalesced into an international body, they adopted the theology of the Second Coming of Christ. In various ways, this doctrine is part of the theology of all major Christian denominations. The Second Coming of Jesus is also a subject that has been discussed in many writings of Judaism, Islam, Rastafarianism and the Bahai faith.

Another thing that Matthew tells us is that, when Jesus comes back to earth, he won’t take everybody with him to heaven. Some people will be taken, and some will be left. What’s with that???? To me, this seems unbelievably cruel. Why would someone who spends his life preaching and living the love of one’s neighbors, not want to take all of them with him to Heaven?

Jesus gives the explanation that back in Noah's time, the people who were **not** saved on the Ark and were left to drown in the flood were left because of their evilness and wickedness. And so it will be when Jesus returns to earth, he will take up the good people, those who are faithful to God, and will leave behind those who are faithless and evil.

I have to admit that I have a lot of trouble with this passage. Not only the apparent cruelty and unfairness of the whole thing, but we are told to "get ready" for this event. But how do we get ready? In today's readings, neither Matthew nor Paul nor Jesus tell us what to do. Only in the following chapter of Matthew do we learn that Jesus tells us that by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoner, we will be given credit as if we had done those kind things for Jesus himself.

What are we to make of these passages? What message can we take from them?

Well, first of all Advent isn't about commercial Advent calendars. It isn't about Black Friday, or the 27 shopping days until Christmas. It isn't about partying or reveling or the season to be jolly. It isn't about spending money on silly presents, even the best-intended ones. Well, of course we are all going to do all those things, just like we do every year during the Festive Season. We even have a parish Fête to have fun, but also to raise money to in order continue to mission of this church and to donate to community organizations. Last week Father Geoff—in his stewardship sermon—enumerated many of the good and altruistic causes that we as members of this parish participate in. The two things—having fun and doing good works—are not mutually exclusive.

Last year—rather than spend money on a silly whisky-filled Advent calendar—I would have been wiser to have paid attention to the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans: “...Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

We can heed the words of Jesus by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoner. We can examine our own lives and strive to do away with our own bad behaviors. We can “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” by examining our faith and trying to be better Christians.

The unexpectedness and ambiguity of the nature of the coming of Christ have deeply perplexed people—including this one—forever. The uncertainty which comes with the text has shaped many interpretations of gloom and doom, in an attempt to soothe the anxiety of frightened people. By comparing “the coming of the Son of Man” to the days of Noah, Jesus describes the Second Coming as an event that nobody can predict or know except God.

In struggling to understand what this all means, I believe the vagueness of the description of the coming of Christ shouldn’t necessarily result in fear and anxiety – but rather in awe and hopeful wonder. This hopeful wonder reinforces our status as humble creatures before God.

If and when Jesus returns to earth for a Second Coming—and if it happens during our lifetime—we can wonder and hope and pray that we will be among those taken up and not those left behind.

One of the most beautiful Advent hymns, and one which we were planning to sing as our closing hymn today, says:

“Come thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.”

It is one of my favorite hymns, with text written in 1744 by Charles Wesley and set to the tune called *Stuttgart* by Christian Friedrich Witt. The hymn commemorates both the birth of Jesus and his Second Coming. To me it is the perfect prayer to begin our observation of Advent.

Amen.

