

1st Sunday of Advent “Be on Guard, Be Alert!” Nov. 29 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Happy New Year! That probably sounds a little out of place right now, almost five weeks early. But the church calendar year always starts on the Sunday which is closest to the feast day of Saint Andrew, the first of the Disciples which the Gospels record Jesus calling. The feast of St. Andrew falls on Nov. 30 every year.

The season puts us into the shoes of our Jewish forebearers; it remembers the many centuries of waiting which marked the years of the Old Testament. The season reminds us that we are not there yet, heavenly joy is ours by promise, but not by sight. In this season, we speak in the future tense (God will do...). When we get to Christmas, we shift to the present tense (God does...).

The season also reminds us that we are waiting for the revealing of Christ on the last day, expecting his appearance with a joy that exceeds even our expectation of Christmas. We wait for the day when we will see him with our own eyes – when the veil that conceals him now is torn away.

The season has a penitential motif as well – culturally we hardly see this at all, but John’s words in the Gospel readings scream “Repent.” Kneeling as if before the coming King is the posture of Advent. Usually this is simply noted liturgically by the absence of the Hymn of Praise. Prior generations of Christians, had rigorous Advent fasting during this time. Perhaps our COVID restrictions fit in with such penitential practices.

The season of Advent also has a strong love motif running through it. We see remnants of this in the bell ringer who is soliciting a gift for the poor. This act of Christian “charity” or love, is the way that we have long observed this season and is fitting for the Advent season.

The season also has a strong Light and Darkness motif. This seems to come from the northern European roots of the season when the nights grow very long, and the feast of Christmas marks the return of light. As the weeks of Advent pass, the days grow darker, but we light more candles knowing the time of light draws nearer. As Jesus, the Light of the world, comes nearer the light gets brighter.

Finally, the season has a sense of eager expectation to it. The child who sees the presents under the tree and is eagerly expecting the night of Christmas Eve or Christmas Morning to open them is really in an Advent frame of mind. So are all the adults eagerly awaiting the departure of the darkness of the pandemic, the arrival of a cure or vaccine, and the lifting of the Covid restrictions.

Our Gospel lesson today delivers an essentially similar message as we heard in the parable of the Ten Virgins. The exhortation to wakefulness is the same. The parable of the servant who is doing his job, waiting alertly. We just do not know how long this tired old world will continue as it is, but right now we have a job. What is it that we should be doing?

Is not our job to see the signs around us and act? Jesus has forgiven the sins of the world, the signs have been given, the absolution has been pronounced, and the command has been uttered. We need to notice these things. Our servant task is not that complex. We are charged to make disciples, to preach in season and out of season. The time is now. Jesus words will stand forever, until the very end of time. He wants to find us doing this when He comes.

But, God often seems distant to us, especially when times are tough. Like many we are tempted to ask where this good God is on evil days. But if He seems to be distant, the real question is, "Who has moved?" His seeming distance from us is not because of His lack of care or concern or effort. Our own stubborn humanity has too often closed our ears and eyes and minds and hearts to His gracious calling. The muting of His voice is more due to the stopping of our ears than His whispering.

Our world has convinced us that our sin problem is narrowly defined by our morality. It is as if we are naughty, and God has taken care of that, but that He has not touched our real problems of insecurity, of death, of sickness, etc.

We have often failed to receive the promise which **is** ours, but have instead immersed ourselves in our sinful reality. We have acted as if we are doomed to this world and there is nothing to be done. We have not seen the potential which Christ expresses for us in His real presence.

But there is reason for that. We are just so spiritually blind and unable to help ourselves. We can be in the middle of a good thing and not see it. We are like the shapeless clay which the man digs from his field. If you have ever made a garden in clay soil, you know what a pain it is really is. It is heavy and hard to work. Most of the time it is too wet to tolerate much tilling and when it dries out it gets as hard as a rock.

An example is in our reaction to the promise of the Last Day. There is a funny thing that happens to people when they think the end of the world is near. They tend to sell their possessions and act as if they are no longer part of the world. In the 1830's thousands of people did this in response to a man named Miller who claimed the world would end one day, first in the spring of 1843 and then again in the fall of that year. They sold all, gathered together, prayed, and waited, and, of course, nothing happened. Miller recalculated and said he had been off by a little, but only by one year. So many of them waited again. Again, nothing happened.

Finally they gave up on old farmer Miller. But a group of them decided that he had been right but while Jesus had come, we could not see him because we were not following the rules correctly, especially the dietary and Sabbath rules of the Old Testament. They became strict vegetarians and insisted on worship on Saturday and came to be known as the Seventh Day Adventists.

But this kind of waiting is not the waiting that God has in mind. Our waiting should be much more like a waiter who serves tables in a restaurant. He is waiting on tables, but that is not a passive gazing into the sky. It is a real activity, a real thing to do.

So, what has Jesus given us to do? Has He not filled our hearts with love, enriched us with gifts, given us a mission? Is not the perfect waiting when one teaches a child, forgives a sinner, loves a neighbor, feeds a hungry man or helps a poor woman? Is not this the good and faithful servant whom the master will delight in upon his return? This is not just the heroic nor the special service either. Simply taking care of your children, buying the groceries, voting, witnessing to a neighbor and cleaning the house are all the waiting of this servant.

In this way, oddly, the Kingdom does come right now, but it comes humbly, the first coming sort of Kingdom. It looks more like the Jesus in the manger whose

birth we celebrate in a few weeks. That is the kingdom of today, the servant king is our leader, the guy who walked Palestine's dusty roads.

But we also look forward to another coming of Christ on the Last Day. We do await that arrival. On that last day, he will come again in glory, no longer the humble carpenter, but the glorious king of all. He will be the same Jesus and yet different. That is the day our mission changes, but we will still be waiters who love our neighbor and serve them. Until then, we are loving servants of the king in this broken work, bearing his mark in our lives and living as the "invitations" to our fellow human beings to be part of this kingdom of waiters. We look like him in his service, in his love, in his humility. On that day, we will also love but we will look like him in his glory.

You see, God has come right here today. This sacrament, this Word, this absolution are all moments of his glorious kingdom breaking into our lives. We are getting ready to celebrate the incarnation in the Christmastide. This is the celebration of God being "Emmanuel" with us!

And so, He gets right up to those closed ears and shouts once in a while. He puts a foot out in front of us when we close our eyes and He makes us fall so we have to open them. He melts the stubborn heart and pries open the closed mind. Not just to open these things but to speak His marvelous words of love and peace.

The ministry and death of Jesus expand our definition of sin to include all of its effects and the problems which we endure. Jesus died for our empty retirement accounts as much as He died for our lies, moral problems, as well as our very lives. His salvation is applied to our deaths, to our sicknesses, to our fears, as much as it is applied to our naughtiness.

And thus, no Christian can ever say that he or she is alone. Jesus is with us, and that changes everything. No enemy is greater than Jesus Christ. No problem is too big, no shortage is too dire. His wealth, his blessing, his gift is always enough for his people. That means our lives are marked by hope.

That is good because we are like clay. In the hands of the craftsman potter, the clay which is the farmer's bane becomes the object of utility and beauty which is valued and prized.

“Look! I am with you always” Jesus says in Matthew 28:20 and gives us the promise of the Paraclete in John 14:16 and 17 as well as the “I will not leave you as orphans” in verse 18. In this way, we can understand how the Lord who leaves us never, is also the Lord who leaves us for a little while.

What our Gospel text will not allow is some sort of “gospel comfort” that lulls us back into our dreamy drowsiness or dulls the edge of our Lord’s Advent charge. Instead, the promise of His coming, the world’s Savior for a world in need of saving, renews us in our vigilance, filling us with a joyful anticipation that simply won’t let us “sleep.”

The Last Day is coming—the return is near—soon, soon, soon! It is palpable, we can feel the anticipation. The stage is set. In this, the Last Sunday of the Year, we feel the breathless anticipation, the tense, wired awareness, the lingering adrenaline rush, of our approaching, promised deliverance.

Jesus is coming—physically, visibly, finally, certainly—may we be kept alert, faithful, and so very ready by His Word and Sacraments...always.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide with you to life everlasting. Amen!