

## Advent 2012

Advent is our time of preparation.

But preparation for what?

We all know the common answers: to prepare for the Christ child; to prepare for another season of the church; and in our Monday through Saturday lives: to prepare for the chaos that starts with Black Friday and ends in an exhausted heap on the couch the day after Christmas.

But this morning, perhaps we can think somewhat differently about what it is that we prepare for, and in the differences, prepare for and live these coming weeks in a new way.

It's not sentimentality that is supposed to mark this season.

It's not sweet feelings either.

Instead, we prepare ourselves for the greatest paradox in human history: the coming of one whom we would never expect; and, I think, if we're honest with ourselves today; we still don't expect.

It's perhaps true that most folks believe that what goes around comes around.

We believe, most of us, that the good will be rewarded and the bad will pay, if not in this life, then certainly in the next.

We believe that accounts will be balanced, debts paid, justice done.

And at some level, I'm sure that is all true: at some level.

But what if the God who comes doesn't stop there?

What if the God who comes isn't satisfied in the simple solution of things being either black and white?

What if the God who comes is a God who doesn't see good guys on the one hand and bad guys on the other, but who instead sees each and every one of us as a mixture of both good and bad?

What if the God who comes doesn't, in the end, condemn sin, but instead uses sin as the very pathway through which we are transformed?

What if the judgment of God is not eternal bliss or never ending fire, but a love that forgives everything?

Many of these "what ifs" may sound strange to you; but when we clean the often murky window that is our faith; clean away the years of assumptions, of half-learned half-truths; of our own cultural bigotries and prejudices; when we've done some of that cleaning, you may be quite surprised to see what Jesus actually means; what Jesus actually teaches; and what God's "yes" to us actually implies.

Perhaps Advent is intended to be several bottles of Windex and an armload of newspapers ready to clean the windows of our faith.

The preparation that is Advent is to see again, often for the first time, just who this strange God is; this God whose ways are so different from yours, from mine.

It was Henry Miller who said: "*Our destination is never a place, but always a new way of looking at things*".

And so it is as we enter this season of Advent.

Perhaps the greatest heresy in all religion is our constant effort to separate the human from the divine.

That separation is the very place from which we so recklessly and falsely divide the world and each other into the good and the bad.

Heaven is good; earth is bad; so many will say, or think, or simply accept as true.

Yet, we are the creatures of the Creator who, when all of creation was complete, pronounced it and everything in it; including humanity, as "very good."

Our faith, from its beginnings, when God forms Adam from clay, then breathes life into what was, only moments before, little more than a clay pot, from that point on, as God pronounces humanity "made in God's image:" the divine and the human are fused.

And that is what brings us together for the preparation and celebration of Advent.

When God's breath in us wasn't enough for us to find our way to who we are called to become; God becomes a human being to show us the Way.

Once again, we are called to recognize the astonishing revelation that in Jesus, heaven and earth are joined.

The Way of God is the way of reconciliation; of forgiving the unforgivable; of telling the truth; and of loving service, especially to those who deserve it least.

And so we will eat real bread this Advent season; not our usual bland, nearly spiritualized wafers, but actual, chewable bread - and so remember the sheer earthiness of the spirituality we are invited to live.

Advent also signals a change in our gospel companion each year.

We have spent the last year, since last Advent, with the Gospel of Mark.

No gospel is earthier, blunter, more direct, than Mark.

Mark gives us no Nativity scene, no star in the heavens, not even the appearance of the Risen Lord can be found in Mark's original gospel which ends with a young man standing in the open tomb - telling the terrified women that he is risen, that he's gone ahead of them - to Galilee.

The End.

For Mark, the sign of God invading our world is the healing that occurs to flesh and blood individuals, and communities, when Jesus comes to town.

Where God is; separation is ended; sin, the cause of so much separation, is forgiven; and the power to forgive sins is given over to all of humanity: to me; to you -- and to that drunk sleeping at the bus stop.

Mark keeps us grounded in the here and now: that it is here and now that God moves among us; using our failures as necessary stepping stones to a new life.

Today, and for the rest of this coming year, Luke will be our gospel companion, and we will find in Luke some of the best-known, well-beloved stories of what it means to become participants, today, in the kingdom of God.

We begin with Luke's "pay attention story" about the end of the world.

Nothing like an "Armageddon-outta-here" story to get everyone to sit up straight and pay attention!

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, we Episcopalians, generally speaking, aren't Armageddon people.

We tend to leave that to our evangelical brothers and sisters.

And yet ...

It may be that what Jesus is getting at today is not talking about the end of *our* world, or the end of the world in some *distant future*, but perhaps, like a true prophet, he is telling them about the end of *their* world, a world that indeed ended in their generation, with the overthrow of the temple, the rampaging by Rome, and the dispersion of the Jewish people that would last nearly 2000 years.

Prophets, you see, aren't necessarily soothsayers.

You don't find them in storefronts, gazing into crystal balls and telling the future like some kind of physic or magician.

Rather, Jewish prophets are men and women who have the ability to see through the clutter of daily life and who are able to read accurately the signs of the times.

And the signs of those times foreshadow war with Rome, unless the reconciling power of Jesus is accepted.

It wasn't, war came, the Jewish state is obliterated, and the end of the world; the end of *their* world, arrives, just as Jesus said, before that generation passes from the scene.

The Temple is burned to rubble in 70 AD; the people scattered, until at long last, the State of Israel is restored in 1948.

Such were the signs of those times.

Perhaps we too are called to read the signs of our times - especially during this Advent season.

Perhaps we too are called to pay attention to and confront the signs of global warming which is already drowning some of our Pacific islands and their people; which is on track to begin drowning a fair section of many countries' coastal cities.

Our Bishop passes along this piece of information to the diocese:

"If the pictures of those towering wildfires in Colorado haven't convinced you, or the size of your AC bill this summer, here are some hard numbers about climate change: June broke or tied 3,215 high-temperature records across the United States. That followed the warmest May on record for the Northern Hemisphere - the 327th consecutive month in which the temperature of the entire globe exceeded the 20th-century average, the odds of which occurring by simple chance were  $3.7 \times 10$  to the 99<sup>th</sup> power, a number considerably larger than the number of stars in the universe." Rolling Stone Magazine.

Perhaps, in the exercise of **earthy** spirituality, we are called to speak up about our never-ending need to create more wealth, to extract ever more raw materials, to pour ever more pollutants into our atmosphere: since it hardly takes a prophet to see that such a life is not sustainable.

I saw a documentary this past week about how fracking, the process of drilling deep into bedrock and, using chemicals and explosives to extract natural gas, is causing water in peoples' sinks to light on fire or to become so polluted it can't even be used to water gardens.

It's said that a vegan driving a Hummer leaves less of a carbon imprint on the planet than a meat eater riding a bicycle; because the industrial manner in which we raise livestock for food is a fantastic contributor to carbon gasses polluting the atmosphere.

What are the signs of our times and what do they portend for us - what do they call us to do, we might ask, as we scrub away at the window of our faith - praying only for the grace to see clearly, and in seeing, to have the courage to act.

Which gets us back to where we started: spirituality divorced from our daily lives is a farce.

Real spirituality is in the flesh, it is part and parcel of our day-to-day lives.

Real spirituality is in what we do and eat and believe and work for; AND, (and this is the good news), there will be no failure: for the God who creates all that is takes up all that we are: all success, all failure; all good and all evil; and through the power of redemptive suffering, makes all things new.

As we enter this Advent season, perhaps the most spiritual thing we can do is to recommit ourselves, our lives, to ways of living that foster life rather than death; that foster conservation over waste; that foster stewardship over exploitation.

I will leave you with this:

"Love people even in their sin, for that is the semblance of divine love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every loaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love."

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

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