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First Sunday of Advent A – December 1, 2019

One of the first unfortunate detours of Christianity was the belief that Jesus was coming back very soon. Much of the New Testament and early Christian practice was based on this belief. Most of the New Testament was written between 30 and 60 years after Jesus, Matthew was written 50 years after, in about 80AD. Those who knew Jesus realized he wasn't returning next week or next month, and they started writing down his teachings and sayings, and some of the history of his life. Up until then, there wasn't a need to write everything down, because he was coming back very soon. The New Testament writers still believed Jesus would return soon, but as those who knew Jesus and the apostles began to die and be martyred, they wanted to make sure the teachings weren't lost.

As it turned out, Jesus didn't come back right away, and once those who had known Jesus and the apostles, and those who had known those who had known Jesus and the apostles, started to die off, Christianity as we know it started to take shape.

But, in that first century after Jesus, when the early Christian church started to organize, it was largely based on an apocalyptic outlook. That's why we have Gospel passages like today's, and the ones from Luke that we were hearing last month. Many of Paul's and other New Testament writings were based on this gloomy outlook. Those first century followers were convinced that the world as they knew it was coming to an end, Jesus was returning soon, and they needed to be prepared.

Subsequent generations of Christians read these writings and they also formed beliefs and practices around the imminent return of Jesus.

So, why do I call this an unfortunate detour? Well, if you believe Jesus is coming back very soon to take the righteous to heaven, and your only concern is being part of that first evacuation party, then how does that impact the way you take Jesus' core teaching – Love God and love your

neighbor as yourself? You become obsessed with being right. The Gospel then becomes your own little evacuation plan, and you become focused on dotting all the “i’s” and crossing all the “t’s.” Not really what Jesus intended at all. Remember that old bumper sticker – “Jesus is coming soon – look busy!” When you hear parables like the prodigal son and the vineyard workers, it doesn’t really support this outlook, does it? This bit of context helps me look at writings such as the one today and the others in Advent from a deeper understanding. When I pull off the layer of literal understanding, and look at what’s underneath, what I find is that I’m being called to prepare myself for something that I have no control over – the ongoing revelation of Christ in my life. Jesus’ second coming is continuously happening, and when I’m preoccupied with all the busyness of what I **think** is important – being happy, acquiring possessions, attaining status, winning friends and influencing others – when that becomes my focus, then I’m very likely to miss the presence and action of God in my life. That’s what the Gospel is pointing to, at a deeper level. It’s what Paul was trying to say, though he was operating from the view that Jesus was coming in the next week or so. However, it still resonates for us, when we take the deeper understanding. Though we have no control over grace entering our lives, we need to create the path of least resistance to God’s grace overtaking us.

I think it’s very interesting that mundane images are used in today’s Gospel – eating and drinking, loving your spouse, working in the field, grinding wheat – to illustrate how spiritual awareness can come to us. We don’t need to be learned theologians, or holy people sitting in a monastery. Our normal, everyday lives are the perfect time and place for God’s presence and action.

And, at this time of year, when our normal everyday lives become hyperactive with the busyness of the holiday season, it becomes especially difficult to create a space inside for Emmanuel. Ironical, isn’t it, that at time when we should be focused on the simple quiet way God chose to become one of us, we tend to fill our time with more and more and more activity – decorating, buying, cooking, partying. Not that there’s anything wrong with celebrating. But, it can become such a

frenzy for some of us that it can completely blur the sublime presence of the Christ.

I was talking about this with Elizabeth the other day, how I seem to have these déjà vu moments at this time of year, not pleasant ones, I'm afraid. Being in a crowded store, its cold and wet outside, I'm tired and irritable, and looking for ***just that right thing*** – an ingredient, a piece of decoration, a food, a wine, a gift. Harried, hurried, and cold. I forget who I am and whose I am. It's happened so many times to me over the years, and each time it happens I tell myself, I don't want to do this again anymore. And, yet, there I find myself – sometime between the middle of November to end of December, in Tucson, Nogales, Phoenix, or Delco. The good news is, it happens less and less. By the grace of God, I've let more and more of that go.

That is the real key to being prepared for Christ's presence and action within. It's letting things go – the things we think are oh so important, “It wouldn't be Christmas without...(you fill in the blank)” For me these past years it's been letting go of watching all the right holiday movies – oh my list is a long one – and Elizabeth questions whether many of my choices are even holiday movies at all. But, I've come to let go of having to watch them all, or even watching any. And, I haven't gone into withdrawal. My experience has been that the Holy Spirit provides the necessary comfort and reassurance when I choose to let something go. Maybe there are one or two things that you would be willing to let go of this season to make a little more room for the Christ child. They don't have to be big, but they should be things that make you just a little nervous about letting them go. Make it an Advent devotion, to let go of that one thing – a special food, a purchase, an activity. And, then, this is the important part – fill that space with a contemplative act. If you don't fill it with some worthwhile spiritual practice, believe me it will fill itself with some other meaningless activity. It could be as simple as sitting in front of the window for 10 minutes every morning looking with eyes of love at the world. Or reading some devotional literature. Or a short contemplative prayer practice. Or going to bed each night writing down the things you are grateful for. You'll know what it is, because it's something your heart has been wanting to do for awhile. Notice the

order in which I made these suggestions, because it's very important – first let go of something, and then begin a practice. You can't begin a new practice in an already full life and expect it to be fruitful. In my experience, it becomes just another thing to do in a season when there's already too much to do.

That is my message for you this first Sunday of Advent – Jesus isn't coming back very soon, because he's already been coming, continuously revealing his loving presence in our lives, if we're awake enough to notice. We must let go, and create a path of least resistance to Christ's presence and action within us. God is with us, my sisters and brothers. His glorious majesty resides in the last place we would look for him – the humble manger of our hearts. May we be still enough, quiet enough, aware enough this season to notice, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

## **The Collect**

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

## **Old Testament**

### **Isaiah 2:1-5**

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come  
the mountain of the Lord's house

shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;

all the nations shall stream to it.  
Many peoples shall come and say,

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;

that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.'

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;

they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,  
and their spears into pruning-hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the Lord!

## **The Response**

### **Psalm 122**

Laetatus sum

1 I was glad when they said to me, \*  
"Let us go to the house of the Lord."

2 Now our feet are standing \*  
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

3 Jerusalem is built as a city \*  
that is at unity with itself;

4 To which the tribes go up,  
the tribes of the Lord, \*  
the assembly of Israel,  
to praise the Name of the Lord.

5 For there are the thrones of judgment, \*  
the thrones of the house of David.

6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: \*  
"May they prosper who love you."

7 Peace be within your walls \*  
and quietness within your towers.

8 For my brethren and companions' sake, \*  
I pray for your prosperity.

9 Because of the house of the Lord our God, \*  
I will seek to do you good."

## **The Epistle**

### **Romans 13:11-14**

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

## **The Gospel**

### **Matthew 24:36-44**

Jesus said to the disciples, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."