

The First Sunday of Advent Year B, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9' 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“And what I say to you I say to all----keep awake”

Happy New Year everyone, today we begin the season of Advent and churches around the world will sing a familiar hymn “Lo He comes with clouds descending.” Another hymn many will sing is O, Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. These two hymns are bookends for this First Sunday of Advent, one celebrating the coming of Jesus to reign in glory, the other beseeching God to come and dwell with us. We need both to capture the tension we are experiencing in the beginning of this new Church Year.

People have always been curious and interested in what we call the apocalyptic sayings in Scripture. In Jesus’ time they wanted to know when the end was going to come. But a closer reading of today’s Gospel reveals that Jesus is not interested in encouraging speculation: But about that day or hour no one knows, only the Father (v. 32) Instead we are to put our efforts into living an expectant life by keeping alert and watchful.

Jesus is calling us to action in this season of Advent. As we will see in the coming weeks, this action is one of repentance and mission, not

simply waiting around for things to unravel. The images in today's gospel of going on a journey and making arrangements for others to be in charge are good ones for Advent. There is a personal journey we are called to take, a spiritual cleanup, a throwing out of things that gets in our way of having a relationship with Jesus right now. And there is a need to be collaborative about this. We can't just take off on the trip: we have to include others in our plans.

This is the time when we should seize the high ground and treat these four weeks like we are serious about our Advent living. In the past we the congregation of Epiphany, would make the Jesse Tree, our own personal Advent Wreaths, decorating the church, Lessons and carols and the Christmas pageant. Sadly, because of the COVID 19 pandemic these events will not be possible this year.

But there is a deeply personal side to all this as well. Each of us has a heart that longs for things to be better. We want peace, even though much of the world clamors for war. We want justice, even though many tell us to take advantage of every opportunity to get more, though often it means others will have less. Instead Advent calls us to an abundant life that is more spiritual and less material. It invites us to put our faith and trust in God's mercy and divine intervention. It compels us to have a

heart for truth, mercy, and justice, and to find ways and time to work for those things because they are the things God cares most about.

Today's collect for the First Sunday of Advent asks for God's grace that we might "*cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light*". There is certainly a moral dimension to this. The secrets we keep, the untruths we tell, the hatreds we cherish, the schemes we dream up to get what we want are all in need of being thrown out. But their replacement with light is not automatic. What begins to transform us is our turning from maintenance to mission, from self to others. In a culture filled with ways and the internet sites on how to do things better for us, we are called to proclaim a mission to others, especially those who do not know or have a relationship with their creator and redeemer. The armor of light should be a visible beacon to those who sit in darkness.

The church is not a diversion or pastime. It is a vivid sign of God's having entered the world to redeem it. Advent is a good time for us to live like people who are being redeemed. It is a good time to develop new relationships with people outside our walls.

Advent is a time for a new beginning, a time to examine our structures and see what helps us to move out in mission and what keeps us from it.

As we stress over the coming holiday, Advent calls us to prepare for something much bigger than the yearly arrival of Christmas. Advent calls us to pay attention to the world around us, even as it is wracked with suffering, violence and hunger. The first Sunday of Advent begins a story of cosmic proportions, with the sun being darkened and the stars falling from heaven.

Advent, in all the readings today, reminds us that our ancestors once called out for a Savior, and that we in the Church wait for the return of one. *We wait, and we hope*, knowing nothing other than to keep working, keep watching, and keep awake. In our lowest points, we are tempted to wonder if things will be this way forever. But this season that we begin today has a presence that calls us to look deeper. It whispers to us, urgently, “***Keep Awake!***” It is a call of urgency and longing, but also a call of promise: there is hope. Things will not always be as they are. Something is coming that is even bigger than Christmas. The world still waits for justice. The world still waits for peace. The world still waits for God. Peace on earth.

Advent whispers to us: the night is long and difficult but the dawn is coming.

“And what I say to you I say to all----- Keep awake.” Amen.

