

First Sunday of Advent (B)
November 27, 2011

“Be watchful! Be alert! Don’t be caught unaware!” Jesus warns his disciples in this Sunday’s Gospel. We begin another Advent season of watching and waiting. Certain Christian denominations like Seventh-Day Adventists and Pentecostals take the message of today’s scripture readings quite literally. They really believe and hope for Christ’s second coming. They meditate on the prophet Isaiah who prayed: “Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways!” They find rooted in the Bible an eagerness, even an ecstasy about the coming of God into their world.

Even after “the Word was made flesh,” there was a profound expectancy for the second coming of the Word. St. Paul, today, speaks of waiting for the full revelation of the Lord. The disciples of Jesus really believed they were *doorkeepers* and that at any minute their master would return. They believed that the second coming would happen in their lifetime. But with the passage of centuries, Christians begin to settle in and forget about Christ’s second coming. Of course, the church still had the season of Advent, but it became a kind of “let’s pretend time.”

Let’s pretend that we live in that period of time before the birth of Jesus when women and men longed for the coming of the Messiah, when they dreamed dreams and sang songs about a wonderful day when swords would be beaten into plowshares, when the lion would lie down with the lamb, when a fresh shoot would sprout forth from the stump of Jesse, when a virgin would bear a son and name him Emmanuel. Advent became a season of commemorating the time before the birth of Jesus instead of a season of expecting that Jesus was going to come again.

The liturgy nudges us today with scriptures to take seriously the second coming of the Lord. We began our First Sunday of Advent not just as a time to commemorate Christ’s first coming at Christmas but as a special time to remember that he is coming again. God is coming again to save all people. As the gospel parable reminds us today, we don’t know *when* it will happen but that it *will* happen. That “great day” in practice is the day on which we will be called individually to face our Lord and Creator.

This is the meaning of Advent, a deep trust that despite our pre-Christmas rush and anxieties, despite the gloomy state of the economy and the prospect of war in the Middle East and elsewhere, despite all our fears and lost hopes, God is coming to save all people.

I want to share something that sparks my Advent hope. It happened each year when I was pastor in the Skagit Valley. Teachers at Immaculate Conception Regional School in Mount Vernon weren't helping their small band of students to put up Christmas lights or a Santa Claus display. No, they were teaching them how to dig into the Skagit soil and plant tulip bulbs for the coming of spring. They were teaching them to hope against hope. They were teaching them something about expecting promises to be fulfilled. Those teachers are like the church helping us to dig deeper into the meaning of our faith, nudging us to take time during this anxious season to plant some seeds of hope in our God who is coming to save all people.

Every now and then I hear someone say, "I just can't get into the Christmas spirit." Maybe that's because we have never entered the Advent spirit. Advent is not a time to tremble in fear but to wait in joy. Advent is not a time to give up but to begin anew. "Rejoice, rejoice, to you shall come Emmanuel."

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