

Today we are celebrating the First Sunday of Advent—the first Sunday of a new liturgical season—in fact, the first Sunday of a whole new liturgical year. So let me be the first to say to you, “Happy New Year’s!”

Advent of course is our season of expectation, our season of looking forward, in preparation for the advent, the arrival, of Christ. And the curious thing about Advent is that we are preparing for the arrival of Christ in two different but simultaneous senses. We are looking forward to the coming of Christ among us at Christmas, remembering when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. And at the same time we are looking forward to the coming of Christ as the King of Glory at the end of time, the Son of Man who will come with the clouds and with power to end the strife of earth and to renew the world. In Advent we look forward to both the First and the Second Coming of Christ, and we strive to prepare ourselves in heart and mind and spirit for both.

And that means that Advent is a time of contrast, a time between times, a time of tension between what is *now* and what is *not yet*. Because God came among us in Jesus long ago, we know that God is already now doing great things among us, building us up as the Body of Christ. But because we see that justice and peace are still not complete in the world, because there is still suffering and pain and alienation in our societies and our lives and our spirits, therefore we know that the fulfillment of Christ’s Reign has not yet come to pass. We live in the time between times, in the tension between now and not-yet—and Advent calls us to keep awake to both.

Our scripture readings this morning all reflect on that sense of tension between what is now and what is not yet. It’s in the First Testament reading, as the prophet longs for God to come forth and end the time of waiting. Most historians agree that this part of the Book of Isaiah was written after the Exile, when the People of Israel had been released from their captivity in Babylon and were allowed to return home to Judah and Jerusalem. The People took this release and return as God’s great action among them, the fulfillment of promises made in an earlier part of the Book of Isaiah, where the prophet spoke of how God would stir up Cyrus, the ruler of the Persians, to let the Israelites go; how God would create a highway in the desert to make it easier for the Exiles to return home; how God would make rivers flow in dry places, how God would raise the valleys and lower the mountains, how God would make the desert bloom—all so that the people could thrive and Jerusalem could be rebuilt and the Temple could be rededicated as the place of God’s Name in the earth. All this had been prophesied; but things hadn’t turned out quite the way the prophecies had envisioned. The people had returned, certainly. But rebuilding Jerusalem turned out to be quite a lot harder than the people had expected. Old rivalries and enmities with the neighboring kingdoms arose almost immediately. And the religious fervor for rebuilding the Temple and reestablishing the Temple worship—the people’s devotion and dedication to the covenant of God—were not as strong as their leaders had hoped. The prophet who wrote down the oracle we read today felt trapped, frustrated, caught in between two times—aware that God had done something remarkable among them, but aware also that the full potential had not been reached, the full promise had not been realized, the full blessing had not yet come to be among them. So the prophet prays for a miracle, for a definitive act of God that would end this time of waiting, this time between times, and would bring the fulfillment of God’s promise *now*. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” the prophet says. “You did awesome deeds in the past,” the prophet says, “*Do them again*, to make your name known to your adversaries, and to make the nations tremble at your presence; to rescue us from our iniquities and to make us your people again.” The prophet laments being stuck in the time between times, the prophet doesn’t want to face the tension between the now and the not-yet, so he calls upon God to end the *now*, so that the *not-yet* might arrive.

We see a very different response to the tension between now and not-yet in our Epistle reading today, from Paul’s first letter to the Christian community in Corinth. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “you have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every kind, you are not lacking in any spiritual gift”—and therefore, Paul tells them, they will “be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul has to make this link between receiving spiritual gifts *now* and preparing for the day of our Lord Jesus Christ that is *not yet* because the Corinthians had confused them rather badly. You see, the Corinthian Christians were fascinated by spiritual gifts, by the manifestation of supernatural phenomena in their religious lives. They were fascinated by

having visions of heaven, and hearing divine voices, and speaking in the languages of angels. They thought—or at least some of them thought—that having these spiritual gifts made them better, more holy, than other believers. Some of them thought that these supernatural phenomena meant they were already living the heavenly life, they were already made perfect in the will of God, they were already experiencing the fulfilled Reign of Christ. Some of them, it seems, became so puffed up with pride over their supposed perfection that they thought they no longer had any work to do on earth, they had no mission or ministry or morality to concern themselves with, and all they needed to do anymore was enjoy their own spiritualness. These Corinthians couldn't stand the tension between the *now* and the *not-yet*, so they collapsed them into each other, pretending the not-yet was already now among them. That's why Paul had to write to them to remind them that spiritual gifts are given for a purpose, spiritual gifts are not just things to be enjoyed for their own sake but are instruments for engaging in God's work. Paul spends much of his First Letter to the Corinthians working out that relationship between the gifts of the Spirit and the work of love; but here at the very beginning of the letter, in the passage we read today, he indicates the basic connection: Christians are not lacking in any spiritual gift because those gifts are given to help us be strong and be blameless and prepare for the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have gifts *now* so that we can grow into the full Reign of Christ that is *not yet*.

We hear that same note in our Gospel today, in this selection from Mark's account of the apocalyptic teaching of Jesus. Jesus speaks here with dire warning about the suffering that is to come, about upheavals in the heavens and strife and destruction on earth—but in the end, it is not the dire warning of the *future* that Jesus dwells on, but what we can be doing in the *present*. We should be like servants, Jesus says, awake and alert and at their work, not just passively waiting for the master to come home, but actively preparing the house for the master's arrival. And Jesus by his own example in the Gospel tells us what our work as servants in his house should be: we are to heal the sick; we are to proclaim good news to the poor; we are to love God and love our neighbors; we are to gather people into a community whose actions are justice and peace and service and love. When we do these things Jesus calls us to do, when we are busy being the church Jesus calls us to be, then we don't need to be afraid of the End, whether it comes in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. When we do these things Jesus calls us to do, when we are busy being the church Jesus calls us to be, then we will be ready to open the door for the Master when he comes. We can bear the tension of living in the time between times, we can bear the tension between the *now* and the *not-yet*, Jesus tells us, when we are awake and alert and doing the work the Master has given us to do.

And what that means for us, as Christians in the early part of the twenty-first century, is that we can face the world as it is now, without needing to sugar-coat it or deny it or run from it; and at the same time we can hold in our spirits the vision of the world as it is not yet, the vision of the world as it is yet to be in the fulfillment of God's Reign; and knowing both those truths, we can do the work God gives us to do to help the one become more like the other. We can face the world as it is now, in a time of financial meltdown and widening recession; and we can hold in our spirits the vision of God's Reign that is not yet, where the first are last and the last are first and everyone equally receives the wages of life; and knowing both those truths, we can work to make decisions—and hold our leaders accountable for making decisions—that truly serve the common good, and not just the special interests of a privileged few. We can face the world as it is now, where terrorist acts still shock us even as two wars meant to make us safe from terrorism drag on; and we can hold in our spirits the vision of the coming of the Prince of Peace that is not yet; and knowing both those truths, we can take up the concrete work of peacemaking that will move the one toward becoming more like the other. We can face the world as it is now, where there is sadness and illness and suffering for the people we love and care about—and for ourselves—; and we can hold in our spirits the promise of a way of being that is not yet, where there is no pain or grief, where every tear is wiped away from every eye; and knowing both those truths, we can reach out to each other with compassion and love and with the power of prayer, and we can help each other keep awake to the presence of Christ strengthening and empowering our spirits. We can live in the time between times, we can live in the tension between *now* and *not-yet*, when we are doing the work Jesus has shown us how to do, preparing the house for the Master to arrive.

That is what this season of Advent means to us. That is what we turn our attention to as we begin this new liturgical year. And that is how we live in this time between times as Christ's Advent people in the world. Amen.