

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Advent 1-C; 2 December 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201811281008)

Advent

In nomine...

I. Intro

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.” Look at the shopping malls and the storefronts. Once they sprout garland and wreaths, and jingle jangle starts pouring out their loudspeakers, you know Christmas is near. Or, maybe Thanksgiving. Or at least Halloween is over. Maybe.

Actually, all these things are, for the church in the West, the world’s reminder to us that this is the season of Advent. Advent is the beginning of the church year. In Advent, the ancient church calls us to hold on a minute. Just as you don’t get to Resurrection without the passion, you don’t get to Jesus’ birth without a period of expectation, preparation, and waiting. Baby Jesus doesn’t appear in the nativity creche until Christmas!

But what a beginning we find in today’s Gospel! Lest you forget you have come to a church with a memory and a tradition that stretches back further than Black Friday and the Christmas shopping season, our lectionary gives us Jesus, on the eve of the Passion, speaking in apocalyptic terms about the coming end of the world as it had been known. Because sweet little baby Jesus isn’t all candy canes and sugar plum fairies. At the birth of Jesus the world would tremble, the angels would sing, strange practitioners of foreign faiths would come from afar. Such would be the distress of the powers upon whose reign Jesus intruded that innocent babies would be slaughtered and young families would flee to live as refugees in foreign countries.

II. Thesis

There is something ultimately good and embracing about the coming of Jesus, but it isn’t necessarily going to sit comfortably with us. When we make space for Jesus in our lives, that’s going to displace other things. It’s going to cause some discomfort and some irritation. When

we do it right, we'll likely come into a crisis that demands some major shifts and changes in our understanding of ourselves and God and the world around us.

This is why we subject our children to Polio vaccinations. This is why we willingly walk ourselves or our spouses into the hospital to go under the knife and have cancerous bits removed. The cure, or even the prevention, is worth the discomfort. This is why we talk to our therapists about things we'd rather not remember, and we show up for recovery meetings to share our struggles with strangers. The process is demanding, sometimes deeply unpleasant, and always challenging. But we have flirted with the alternative already and we know that it is worse.

We like baby Jesus because he seems safe. Harmless, even. But for those who saw, baby Jesus was a world-changer. The angels and the shepherd rejoiced. Those with a vested interest in the status quo trembled. They wouldn't have given a second thought to the use of tear gas to try to make him turn back.

III. Good News

Here's the good news of Advent. Baby Jesus didn't just lie in the manger and coo. Jesus rocked the world and showed us the path to something better. When death is your destiny, disruption is a good thing. When sorrow is your standard, a shift in circumstances comes as a relief.

If you hear the promise of Advent, the promise of change in your life, and you recoil, then you might find yourself allied with Herod and Pilate and all those who fought so hard to defend the status quo from Jesus' intrusion. If our church is comfortable and happy with the way things are going, then Jesus' promise of change isn't going to sound like good news.

But if you're homeless or hungry, unemployed or underpaid or unappreciated, if you are looking for something better, then I have good news for you. This is Advent. The people heard about the coming of Jesus and they all trembled. Some for joy and some for fear and most for both reasons.

This is Advent: we know that Jesus was born already, died and was raised from the dead. In today's Gospel Jesus speaks of a second coming, a return that we still await today. And just like

baby Jesus, lying in the manger, “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” will bring change and disruption. For those of us who have met Jesus in baptism, we who gather here to celebrate Advent and to renew our own alignment with the mission of Jesus, the mission of God, the mission of God’s church: for us who have known Jesus in his coming in our own lives and in the lives of those around us, that second coming has already begun. We individually and we as a church community are bringing into the world a foretaste of the final, second coming of Jesus, when those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled, but those who are fixated on the riches and systems of this world will be dismayed and disappointed.

IV. Invitation

“Be alert!” says Jesus.

Be alert for what? For the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus is coming in some final, fulfilling way that will bring us rest and completion. We talk about that as the end of time.

“Be alert!” says Jesus. The Son of Man is coming not only someday at the end of the time, but Jesus is coming today, even now, in your life and mine. Have you not seen Jesus come at different times and circumstances already in your life? I was at a store here in Glassboro this week where a man told me the story of Jesus appearing to him in a hospital room, telling him to pray because God was listening. This man was changed by his encounter with Jesus.

Where have you seen Jesus? Did you recognize him? Has Jesus not come to you in the guise of a friend or a family member, or a person at church who shared with you a word, a hug, a meal, or just an understanding presence in your time of need? Has Jesus come to you in a hymn, a reading, a sermon? Do you encounter Jesus at the altar rail as you receive the real presence of Jesus embodied in bread and wine?

What is the encounter with Jesus that brought you here today? What is the encounter with Jesus that brought you to St. Thomas’ in the first place? When did you first hear Jesus’ invitation to faith?

“Be alert!” That means keep an eye out not only for the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Be alert! to his more subtle presence. For the ways that he has met you even today, even every day.

This is a busy season. Time for shopping and for parties and for gathering with family. But don't lose Advent for the Christmas preparations. Be alert! Set aside a time to do your shopping and a time to do your baking. Don't short-change yourself for time to be alert, to be contemplative, to eagerly look for and receive the presence of Jesus even now.

Advent is the beginning of the church year. Advent is a season intended to disrupt our day-to-day busy-ness and to recall us to awareness of the presence of Jesus even now. Advent begins with a warning: Jesus will bring disruption to your world. If you're attached to something else more than you are to Jesus, that disruption will be scary and unwelcome. But if it's Jesus you're looking for, if the Kingdom of God is the home for which you yearn, you will see Jesus coming even now in your own life with power and great glory.

I wish you a holy and fearful and joyous Advent.

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