

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Advent 1-A; 1 December 2019
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
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The Advent of God in History

In nomine...

I. Intro

I'm a newcomer to the church year. It's not something I grew up with. My family celebrated Christmas and Easter – but I never realized these were part of a larger story that gets told, year by year, by the practice of churches around the world and throughout the last 2000 years.

But the practice of the church year indeed tells a story, and the 12 days of Christmas, beginning on Christmas Day and extending until Epiphany on the 5th of January, stand in parallel to, but are smaller than, the Great 50 Days of Easter. Likewise, the season prior to Christmas, the 20-odd days we call Advent, stands in parallel to the 40 days of Lent.

So it is as retail interests tell the Christmas story for their own purposes, the churches find themselves a little out of step, celebrating the Christmas seasons *after* Christmas and striving to observe a holy Advent, like Lent, as a time of preparation. By the time Christmas actually arrives, the stores will have left it far behind! While the stores seek to cover the lengthening nights of the approaching winter solstice with the glare of Christmas lights, the church invites us to something different. Advent was given to us as a time of quiet reflection and hallowing, preparation to really receive the gifts of the Christmas season.

As we enter into Advent, I want to adopt an idea that came from Father John Sankovitz of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN. Father Sankovitz, of blessed memory, pointed out that the word “Advent” means coming, and that in Advent we anticipate the coming of God. In fact, we anticipate a three-fold coming of God: in History, Mystery, and Majesty. History, Mystery, and Majesty. Today I want to consider with you for a few minutes God's coming in history.

II. History: Israel

Our first reading today speaks of God breaking into history. It's a striking reading because God breaks in at a very curious time in Israel's history. God did not come when the people were "ready." In the chapter prior, the prophet has lamented a people who have given themselves over to violence and fraud, inequality and looking out for number one. This is a people who have abandoned God and everything that God has called them to be. Isaiah has just described the idolatry, injustice, selfishness and faithlessness of God's people! It was when the people were most *unready* that God came to save them from drowning in their unreadiness! God comes when the people are at their worst!

And listen to how God comes in our reading today:

Isaiah says, "Many **peoples** [*the Hebrew word is goyim: its meaning is "them, not us"*] will 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** Torah, and the word of the LORD **from** Jerusalem." These will go forth to other places, not just Judea, and as a result God's peace will settle on others, just as God promised for Israel.

If you were a religious partisan who thought you had an exclusive claim on God's love, this is terrible news, frightening news, threatening news! But if you thought you were excluded, on the outs with God – this is Gospel.

Isaiah is trying to arouse the people's jealousy. It's not that God no longer loves God's people. It's that God's love is not exclusive. For many of us, that is a challenging bit of news. An exclusive, sectarian claim on God can be another form of idolatrous wealth. How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven!

Isaiah promised the coming of God in history: right into a history of idolatry and faithlessness.

III. History: Jesus

Now of course, as Christians, especially as Christian living in the expectant season of Advent, we see Jesus all over this passage from Isaiah. We hear the prophecy and we believe that it has been fulfilled by the coming of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah who turned out to be God incarnate. We believe it was fulfilled by this same Jesus who lived among us, died for all of us, and invites us to his table week by week.

God came in history. No-one seriously denies the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. For us, the coming of Jesus in history sure did seem to match up to the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus was born in a time of great trial and upheaval for God's people. In response to Jesus' life, the Old City of Jerusalem has grown ever greater in its importance. We, the nations, continue to stream to that city as pilgrims. In response to the instruction that has come forth from that place we join together week by week as a School of Discipleship called St. Thomas', a church, to receive God's instruction and to hear the word of the Lord, to which we regularly respond by saying, "*Thanks be to God.*"

So God came in history, when the world was drowning in violence and unreadiness.

IV. History: Us

But the baby Jesus isn't the end of the story, is it? Because the prophecy has not been fulfilled completely, and the promise of swords hammered into ploughshares has not been finally brought to fruition, we await a yet further Advent of God coming to us.

Just like the people to whom Isaiah first prophesied, we find ourselves today both unready and in deep need. God comes in history, and oh, what a tortured history ours is. Most of us would prefer to forget about the injustices faced by native Americans, the legacies of chattel slavery, and continuing issues of inequality, racism, sexism, and whatever other -isms you might name. On a personal level we remember arguments, fights, and failures we've had with those we love – or with other people who are important in our lives. We're caught up in administrative drama, in debt and obligation and addiction. We make ourselves crazy just trying to ignore all the things that bother us so much!

This is the history of our lives: into which God also comes. As we learn to recognize the Advent darkness in our lives, we will begin to discover the light of God's coming to precisely those places. God comes to us not in response to our holiness but in response to our need, even before we can give voice to that need in a plea for help.

IV. Resolution: Because... therefore

The invitation at the end of the prophet's cry in today's reading is this: "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

Because God loves them, the Israelites were not left alone in the darkness of their faithlessness. God sent them Isaiah to remind them of God's love for them and to invite them into the light.

Because God loves all humanity, the world was not left in darkness. God became incarnate and was born to Mary and Joseph, bringing light and hope into a world of travail.

Because God loves us, we are not left alone in the darkness of our own sordid histories. Even if we spend a few weeks in the twilight of Advent, we do so with the confident expectation that Christmas is coming. We can acknowledge the darkness as precisely the places where we will soon see God at work. As God comes into our lives, we become children of God's light, being healed ourselves and finding God's power at work within us to heal others.

In the Advent of God, God breaks into history not when we're ready, but when we are unready. God comes in history and changes it forever.

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