

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Advent 1-B (29 November 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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

1 Falling Asleep

There was an article in the news this week about an extended family in Arlington, Texas: a community in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. This family has taken great care all year long to avoid making each other sick. They all agreed to stop going to church, to bars, and to restaurants – even those with outdoor seating. They changed their weekly extended family meals into monthly, socially-distanced, outdoor gatherings. They maintained this discipline for months and months. And then, earlier this month, one of them invited a few others over for fajitas and birthday cake. They didn't actually plan to be inside together, but they just kind of ended up gathered in the living room, like old times. But the next day, one of them texted to say they were feeling bad. And soon they discovered that every single person there, all 15 of them, tested positive for Covid-19. The grandmother ended up in the hospital, with breathing assistance. The grandfather was at home, unable to visit his wife. Even the children and the pregnant mom were all suffering.

I heard this story and I could see myself in it. It would be so easy, too easy. Too easy to let up the discipline and the care and the hard choices that my family has been making for nearly the entire year, now. There's a kind of pandemic fatigue that sets in. We get tired. Tired of saying "no." Tired of staying home. Tired of cooking for ourselves. Tired of not being with our friends and our families. Tired of staring at the computer screen. Tired of attending church online or outdoors.

2 Pandemic

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is talking about another pandemic. He is describing the viral infection of sin in the world, those attitudes and activities and dispositions that destroy relationships and cause separations among us and between us and God. Jesus talks about the suffering and disruption caused by the pandemic of sin, and the various signs that accompany it. Those signs feel familiar, similar to my experience of this year's coronavirus pandemic. And the fatigue is similar, too.

Prolonged exposure to the pandemic of sin leaves us tired and weary. That weariness tempts us to ease up on the precautions, the disciplines and habits that we use in our pursuit of good spiritual hygiene. It's harder to pray, more complicated to go to church, more tricky to find safe ways to serve others. The TV and a snack are more tempting than ever. Relationship conflicts are harder to deal with since meeting in person is generally discouraged. This whole pandemic ordeal has been going on so long that I'm tempted to get comfortable with it, to make my peace and stop fighting so hard. To accept the familiar, even if it's unpleasant, instead of continuing to yearn for and strive for something better. It's tempting to satisfy myself with lesser things, things that may not make life good, but things that will lull me into a sense of relative comfort and help me to sleep.

3 Advent says, "Wake up!"

But now comes Advent. The message of Advent is, "Keep awake!" Because we're not waiting for a little baby. You can see this in Scriptures of Advent. What we're waiting for is the return of Jesus the King. What we're waiting for is God's redemptive work in history. What we're waiting for is the return of the master. What we're waiting for is the coming of God in power who will tear open the heavens, cause the mountains to quake, free us from this terrible pandemic of sin and soporifics, and establish God's Kingdom forever.

The invitation of Advent is to open our eyes, to splash some water on our faces, and to notice even the small blessings that we receive in the present. These things may not outweigh the pains of the present pandemic of sin, but they are a token, a down payment, an encouragement to us to hold onto the promises of God's Kingdom. The purpose of Advent is to shake us, to rouse us back to consciousness, so that we can make choices once again to set aside the things that distract us from God, and to put our hope someplace sure.

That family in Arlington was lulled into complacency by their many months of care and discipline. By the sheer boredom and uneventful-ness of their pandemic experience. They fell asleep, figuratively, gathered in a living room – and they got sick together. So this week they recorded a video and released it to their community, urging everyone to stay awake, to stay vigilant, and to not give up their resistance to the pandemic.

Vigilance can be exhausting. That's why we're here: to encourage each other. That's why Jesus left us the sacraments of Communion to share and sustain us on our way.

Advent is a time for us to remember, to wake up, to renew our vigilance. It is a time to let go of every lesser thing in which we might be tempted to place our hope or our security or our passion, and to keep our eyes focused on the prize instead. Because our prize is not just a few more years of health and vitality in this mortal form – though that would be no small prize. But our prize is citizenship in God's community, an eternal wakefulness compared with which these 40 or 80 or 100 years in mortal form will have been but the blink of an eye. God's promise is sure. In Advent, the church is telling us, "Hang in there! You're going to make it!"

From the darkness of these shorter days, the darkness of the pandemic, the darkness of our own struggles, Advent invites us to continue to cry out, in the refrain from our Psalm today, "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved."

Amen.