

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Advent 1-C (28 November 2021)

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.

Jeremiah 33:14-16, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36, Psalm 25:1-9

1 Where you look is where you're headed

Have you ever driven past the scene of an accident or some other unusual happening on the side of the road, and noticed how cars swerve toward whatever is going on as the drivers check out the scene instead of keeping their eyes on the road? This is a mistake drivers, even experienced ones, make all the time. It causes lots of accidents every day. Without great concentration and conscious effort, where you look is where you are going to go.

This same phenomenon is even worse for drivers of motorcycles. On a motorcycle, steering generally is accomplished with intuitive movements of your whole body rather than just the handlebars. Where you look is where you're going to go. So if you're staring at the gravelly berm, or the oil slick in the middle of the lane, or that drop off at the edge of the pavement in a tight turn, guess where you are going to go? Right into that trouble you fear the most. The key is always to look ahead. It's an act of faith, entrusting one's body to do the right thing where you are, and to plant your eyes on the spot in the road further ahead where you want to end up. Because where you look, where your eyes are pointed, is where you're headed.

As you steer yourself through the journey of life, there is no shortage of oily gravel piles, potholes, wrecks, and other hazards at which we might choose to stare. Modern advertising and mass media in general has as its whole goal to attract your eyes and keep hold of them. What played big in the media this week, fishing for your emotions, trying to upset you and make you pay closer attention? On my kitchen radio this week I heard a lot about two court cases that stemmed from our country's problems with race and with guns. This weekend I started hearing fears and warnings about the still largely unknown "omicron" variant of Covid-19. Maybe there were other topics in the news that caught your attention, your passion. Maybe you and I understand some of the same stories in different ways, as of different levels of importance. There are lots of important topics about which to think, to learn, to debate, and to act.

The work of the church is to provide an alternative focus. If race, guns, Covid-19, and whatever else caught your attention this week are potholes and oils slick, rough patches that threaten our smooth forward motion in life, the work of the church is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Where we look is where we're headed. Just as the media tell stories over and over again, trying to explain and interpret and understand the currents of our life together in the light of current events, so the Church tells the story of Jesus, the story of the Gospel, the story of God's ongoing love affair with humankind, over and over again, trying to explain and interpret and understand the currents of our life together in the light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The liturgical year, which begins anew this weekend, is one pattern for telling our stories and bringing them into conversation with our lived experience of the present.

2 Gospel: Be alert!

Our Gospel reading today comes from a conversation Jesus had with his disciples just a few days before his death. Jesus had already entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. He knew that his exit from this city was a path marked by the cross. So while the disciples are oo-ing and ah-ing about the beautiful Temple, Jesus points out the obvious: war is coming. Conflict is brewing between radicalized zealots and the brutal army of the Roman empire. Chaos is in the air. In the faces of people all around Jerusalem there is distress, confusion, and fear. These are dark times, and the Temple, that beautiful building, is a distraction, a false comfort in the face of what is going on, what is about to happen. So Jesus tells his disciples, "Be alert!" Don't let the prevailing winds of fear and foreboding carry you away with them. Because where you look is where you're headed.

Beautiful buildings, triumphal entries, dreams of a Messiah: these all point toward God but they're all just shadows, distractions, less than the reality we seek. Chaos in the streets, conspiracy and insurrection, even a total lack of justice that leads to the quasi-legal hanging of an innocent man on a tree: these all point toward the brokenness of our world, but they, too, are just shadows, distractions, less than the reality we seek. These distractions demand our attention, dissipate our energies, and discourage us from living into the Kingdom of God to which Jesus calls us. But where you look is where you're headed.

So Jesus encourages his disciples to *be alert*. Pray that you may have strength to escape the distractions and to fix your eyes on the Kingdom of God. Jesus did not avoid the cross, but instead was empowered to walk straight through it because he had his eyes fixed on the larger story of God's unstoppable love for humankind. Love that will not be stopped by the hatred and injustice we experience around us; light whose piercing presence will not be thwarted by the darkness of our times.

Like steering a motorcycle, it's a bit of an act of faith: the Kingdom of God is real, but not fully realized in our own perspectives, our own imaginations. We're still learning to see it, to detect it, to grasp at its edges. We live in the world created and sustained by God, powerful and loving. This isn't to say we should accept the evil we find around us, but rather that we can remain uncowed, undaunted, unafraid of the challenges we face. Even those things that are most threatening, most personal, most hurtful: we can encounter them head-on: learn, debate, and act, when we have in perspective the greater power of God who is both faithful and able to protect us.

3 Church & Advent

Advent is a time to *stop!* Notice where your eyes are fixed. And make conscious choices about where you want to go. It's a time to shift our perspective, to refocus, to pick a destination worth ending up at. In Jerusalem, Jesus knew where he was going. Jesus also knew the cost of going there. He kept his eyes fixed on that destination, refusing to be distracted even by the prospect of crucifixion. Because the cross was just part of the path forward to something else. Jesus kept his eyes fixed on God's love for humankind, and invites us to keep our eyes fixed on him. That way, no matter what hazards and gravelly patches come our way, we can be sure that we, too, will learn to recognize that even now we are safely held in the tender arms of God.

Amen.