

Date: November 29, 2020 (Advent 1; Year B)

1. Texts: Isaiah 64:1-9; Ps. 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37.
2. Subject: Advent as the New Year.
3. Topic: a season of preparation.
4. Aim: educate, challenge.
5. Proposition: "The Church's New Year is aimed at the end of time for which we Christians prepare."

## WATCH AND PREPARE

Today is the first Sunday in Advent—today is New Year's Day in the Church. I don't know why it's the Church's New Year. No one seems to know exactly. But then, we don't really know why January 1 is the civic New Year either. So, let's just accept it: Advent 1 is the Church's New Year.

Today we switch our liturgical colour to either violet or blue, depending on our parish's tradition. In the lectionary we move to Year B of the three-year cycle. Today we begin to anticipate our Christmas Eve celebrations.

Whoa! Stop right there! Advent and the New Year are *NOT* about anticipating Christmas. Nope. No. Never. Listen to what Jesus said:

'But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven... 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at

dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.<sup>1</sup>

That surely does not sound like snowflakes and Christmas pageants and presents for good little girls and boys, does it. No. Advent is not about getting ready for Christmas. Advent is all about getting ready for the end of the world.

I understand that this is a whole lot darker and scarier than one might expect on a Sunday morning. But this is what Advent has been about since the early days of the Church. The Bible and the Church have always been clear about this: at some unknown point in time, God will say, "Time, ladies and gentlemen. Put down your pens. The exam is over."

When the Bible talks about this end, it uses terrifying language and images.

The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,  
before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.<sup>2</sup>

Neither their silver nor their gold  
will be able to save them  
on the day of the Lord's wrath;  
in the fire of his passion  
the whole earth shall be consumed;  
for a full, a terrible end  
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

...a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
nor will be again after them  
in ages to come.<sup>4</sup>

This is the same kind of language that both Jesus and the Book of the Revelation use. The end will be perceived as terrifying.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 13:24-27, 32-37.

<sup>2</sup> Joel 2:31.

<sup>3</sup> Zephaniah 1:18.

<sup>4</sup> Joel 2:2.

Except—and this is a crucial point—except for those who stand in a saving relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. We who are saved are saved from that great and terrible day of the Lord. Oh, the end will still come. God will still exercise his judgement. But we inside the saving faith of God will be saved from the horrific impact of his judgement. We will have learned to rely on the grace, forgiveness and love of Jesus. We will have already come to terms with the fact that we need saving and that Jesus is our only Saviour. For us, the Day of the Lord will be a different experience.

This is remarkable. Instead of perceiving the end as the great and terrible day of the Lord, we Christians perceive it as the day of our personal fulfillment as God's triumph is made complete in our lives. The day of the Lord will see us be made exactly the people God created us to be. The "great and terrible day of the Lord" becomes for us the "great and terrific day of the Lord."

This experience will be both individual and communal. We will experience the fulfillment of our creation as individuals and as the Body of Christ.

It is for this day that Advent is the season of preparation. In Advent we prepare for the day of our perfection. And here are some ideas about how to do that.

If the Day of the Lord is to be the day of our personal and communal fulfillment, then it seems logical that we could prepare for that by working towards that perfection. We work towards embodying the life, love, justice and righteousness of Christ as individuals and as the Body of Christ.

This will require that we actually know Christ as he has revealed himself. We're not talking here about that "Sunday School" Jesus. You know that image. This is the Jesus who just tells nice stories for kids or the Jesus who heals everybody who asks him. This is the Jesus that we use to tell people how to behave politely. That's not who we're talking about.

In working towards embodying the life, love, justice and righteousness of Christ, we're immersing ourselves in sacrificial love that works towards the fulfillment of others. This is the Jesus of the woman caught in adultery and the Jesus of the cleansing of the temple. This is the Jesus of the parables of the kingdom and the Jesus of the cross. Yes, we need this Jesus to walk beside us all the way, but he leads by example, and that example isn't all sweetness and light.

This time of preparation is definitely both individual and communal. As individuals and as the entire Body of Christ, we are to serve the world as the outward and visible signs of the real presence of Jesus. This twin reality blesses us. None of us, either as individuals or as communities, is required to prepare on our own. As our fulfillment is both individual and communal, so is our preparation. We are not left on our own.

This New Year in the Church is a challenge. The First Sunday in Advent calls us to know Christ as he truly is. This knowledge is to be both individual and communal. Our commitment to our preparation is both individual and communal. Individually and collectively we are to embody the resurrected Lord. That's how we will prepare for the end of time.

How we will prepare for Christmas is another question entirely.

AMEN.