

Advent 1, Year C
Dec 1, 2024

We are so captive to efforts by the media to yank us into the Christmas season. Several years ago, those car magnets carrying the slogan “Put Christ back into Christmas” became a way to forgive ourselves, tell ourselves and everyone that drove in the vicinity of our car that we in fact hadn’t forgotten the reason for this holy day; coupled with manger scenes popping up everywhere, we are innocent of not understanding Christmas. And now there are Advent calendars for sale in supermarkets! Is there nothing sacred in this world? Let us perhaps ask ourselves the question: isn’t everything sacred in this world? in spite of the fact that these gestures by advertisers are by no means motivated by shining Christ’s light into the world but are driven by how can we profit from “organized religion’s” failures. How many times have we heard, “I pray, of course I believe in God, but I don’t trust organized religion.” So we have excuses by keeping Christ in Christmas, we observe Advent by opening cardboard windows to remove tiny foil-covered pieces of chocolate which we either collect in a secret box or consume onsite, but we don’t gather in sacred spaces with friends, families, strangers-soon-to-be-friends to lift our collective voices in praise of the Holy One who has made the whole world sacred. One wonders.

In case you weren’t listening, not one of our lectionary readings this morning is particularly full of sunshine. There is a distinctly frightening thread running throughout: Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, we ask in our collect of the day; a righteous person who will judge all of us will spring out from David, Jeremiah says. Our psalm is a plea, asking God to show us the right pathways, lest we wander backwards towards our youthful indiscretions: lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil. In Thessalonians, we begin to see “what’s up” as the writer urges us to strengthen our hearts in holiness, so that we will be blameless when Jesus returns to judge the world. It seems as though something is coming and it’s not just the birth of a baby. The author of Luke’s Gospel clearly spells it out: Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great

glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

In the midst of all this terrifying foreboding is the phrase "because your redemption is drawing near." My redemption, your redemption, our redemption is drawing near. Redemption: reclaiming something that we lost but when the debt has been paid, we get back. What have we lost? Metaphorically speaking, our innocence in the Garden of Eden, but more to the point, every time we turn away from God - which we do, at least once a day. One of the priceless rewards of being a member of a Christian community is the miraculous healing which this suspect "organized religion" offers us to relive over and over again: the sequence of events across the twelve months of the year: the baby is born, the baby grows up and becomes our teacher, our friend who seems to abandon us by allowing himself to be humiliated, tried unjustly and murdered, and then - as if by magic - returns, big as life, tells us to continue in his teachings, to be in fellowship with one another, to love one another. And on New Year's Day, which is today - the first Sunday of Advent - we have the opportunity to make amends, to look at our pathetic little lives and start all over again, to try harder, to appreciate the clean slate with which God has gifted us. These warnings of coming disaster which we hear prominently in the season of Advent are curiously coupled with the birth of an innocent baby; when we sing "Come thou long-expected Jesus," we are not just expressing our eagerness to relive the Holy Birth, but also praying for the second coming of the Christ who will judge all the peoples of the earth. There will be folks who will faint with fear at what seems to be the beginning of the end; and yet, if we've been listening to the prophets from Isaiah to John's words in the Book of Revelation, we will understand that chaos comes before redemption, that these signs of destruction of what we know as the norm are bringing in a new heaven and a new earth. So let us stay awake, let us watch

for signs and let us be ready to stand before the Son of Man as he ushers in the Kingdom of God. Advent is the time for us to clean our own house, to pick up after ourselves, to make things right with those around us. For those who have not yet found God or the love and security they long for in sacred places of worship, Advent is the time for us who are in community to open our arms of welcome wider than ever with Jesus' works of justice and mercy and truth for all, so that when chaos ushers in the new heaven and new earth, we will stand together as one with our head raised as our Redemption draws near.