

The First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2011

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Wilmington Island near Savannah, on which I was rector of the Episcopal Church for some years, had a tradition called “Opening the Doors of Christmas,” an event shared by all the island’s churches.

The tradition was that on the first Sunday of Advent all the churches would put up all their Christmas decorations, lights, trees, and music, and invite the public to come in for refreshments. It was very popular.

As you may know, one does not lightly break traditions in Savannah; however, we said, when approached, that we Episcopalians would be delighted to open the doors and greet the public, but we would be keeping Advent. So we had our purple frontal and our Advent wreath and candles and some greens in the sanctuary and a few Advent hymns playing. I believe we were truly counter-cultural and, frankly, a disappointment to some who entered. To others, however, I think it was a revelation. For one, at least, it was a bit of nostalgia: the Lutheran Pastor on the island said, wistfully, the Episcopalians are the only ones who truly understand Advent and Christmas.

What is it that we understand? I think it is the magnitude, the wonder of the Incarnation, God becoming one with his creatures, the event

we call Christmas, and, understanding that, the realization that we cannot simply say, one day, how nice, open gifts, and go on with our everyday lives; we have to prepare ourselves. We need time to ponder and savor the moment.

The word *Adventus* means coming. It is also a Latin translation of the Greek *Parousia* which means “Second Coming,” specifically the Second Coming of Christ. We are living in what has been called “the between time.” We look back and we look forward. Our readings this morning point to both.

In Mark’s Gospel, the shortest and most direct of the gospels, Jesus speaks of that *Parousia*, the end time, an event presaged by cosmic events that may come at any time. You know, if your mind is on Santa, Christmas trees, colored lights, and candy canes, you just might be put off by that reading, and you are supposed to be. It’s a warning. Jesus warns us against complacency, against the assumption that it won’t or can’t happen in the lifetime of his hearers, assuring them that it can and it may. The people of Jesus’ time did not expect, and therefore did not see, that the Messiah, the Christ had come and was standing before them. Jesus warns us to be alert and open to the real possibility that you and I might see that Second Coming. Awesome thought, isn’t it? Are we ready for that? That’s why we keep Advent – to make ready.

How exactly are we supposed to do that? We might try a self-examination, that’s always good, and daily devotions, readings and prayers that help us to focus on what has been and what will be.

In His Holy Name.