

Vespers Homily

The First Sunday of Advent

November 29, 2015

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Mark 13:24-37

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

This Sunday we begin the season of Advent. The name is from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning coming. Unfortunately, it is yet another faulty translation from the Greek word *parousia*, which means Second Coming, the end times and the coming of Christ in power and glory, to send out the angels to gather the faithful from the ends of the earth.

By dropping the “second,” the story, or at least our interpretation of the story, changes the season from one about preparing for a giant, cataclysmic event that will take place at the final Day of Judgment to a story about the baby Jesus and the wonderful events surrounding His coming into the world. It’s such a charming story, so sweet and tender. It is also easier to think about what has been than what will be. It is easier to think of beginnings than ends. Consequently, we say that we live in the “between time” with very heavy emphasis on the joys of Christmas.

The early church was concerned with ends, not beginnings. It had the recent experience of the presence of Jesus and the wonders He had performed and the words He had spoken. It had the recent experience of His end, the final drama of His crucifixion and Resurrection and Ascension, with the final promise that He would return.

The early church was concerned with where He went, when will He be back, and what should we do in the meantime. Their concern is with the *parousia*.

We begin Advent with the Disciples – Peter, James, John, and Andrew – sitting with Jesus on the Mount of Olives. They have just left the city of Jerusalem; now they are looking back, admiring the view. Jesus warns them that, in their time, not a stone of that city will be left in place; it will all be destroyed.

The Disciples are shocked, asking Him when will it happen and what will be the signs that this catastrophe is about to occur. Jesus replies that only The Father knows when it will be, but the signs will be plentiful and terrifying.

All the Synoptic Gospels speak of those signs. Matthew tells us that as in the days of Noah and the Flood, all will be swept away. It will be sudden. Two men will be working in a field; one will be taken, one left behind. Two women will be grinding; one taken, one left behind. It will be sudden and unexpected as though a thief will break into the house.

Luke tells us that there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. There will be distress and perplexity; men will faint with fear and foreboding. The heavens themselves will be shaken.

There will be false prophets, false messiahs, claiming to come in Jesus' name. There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be earthquakes, famines, trials and persecutions. Families will be divided and there will be hatred for Jesus' sake.

(Actually, that part should get our attention).

The “desolating sacrilege,” the “abomination of desecration” will be put up in the Temple, a final affront to the God of Israel. We all know people who would say that is clearly a reference to integration, women’s ordination, gay bishops, guitars in the sanctuary.

All these things are just the preliminaries. Then, Mark tells us, “The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from Heaven; the powers of Heaven will be shaken. Heaven and earth will pass away.”

Then comes the Son of Man. All these things will happen before this generation will pass away.

All of which leads me to believe that Advent might be an appropriate time for some quiet contemplation and preparation, time for a little soul-searching.

As you may know, I was Rector of Saint Francis of the Islands on Wilmington Island near Savannah. An island is generally a small, compact community. There was a Roman Catholic Church, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Lutheran Church, and Presbyterian Church on the island. One year the Presbyterian pastor came up with the idea “Opening the Doors of Christmas.” We were all supposed to put up our Christmas decorations and, on a Sunday afternoon, be open for the community to visit, and be suitably impressed and perhaps convert on the spot. Unfortunately, the date selected was the First Sunday in Advent.

The other churches outdid themselves in trees and lights and music and punch and cookies. The Baptist church wrapped everything not breathing in blinking white lights. Even the Roman Catholic Church had trees in the sanctuary, although they didn’t turn on the lights.

The Episcopalians didn’t play. We decorated for Advent with candles and purple hangings and quietly played Advent hymns. There was an air of calm in the church. The visitors were not pleased, except for the Lutheran minister who said, rather wistfully, “You Episcopalians are the only ones left who understand Advent.”

I took that as a compliment.

In His Holy Name.