

Sunday, December 1, 2013
Advent 1- Year A
Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Advent(ure)

Every year the Church celebrates the season of Advent, as we await the coming One. The Latin “adventus” from which we get the word Advent means “a coming.” In our gospel on this first Sunday of Advent, we have a brief apocalyptic passage where Jesus likens his final coming to the great primeval flood as in the days of Noah. People were minding their own business, he says, when a solid wall of water washed them and all their business away. Others were working in their fields, or grinding meal for their bread, or just sleeping through the night, when the life-changing moment came. At the time of the flood, most people around Noah were occupied with their day to day pursuits. However, their obliviousness, distractedness and lack of concern in spite of Noah’s large boat-building project obviously were no proof that there was no crisis around the corner.

And using another metaphor, the gospel goes on to imply that of the many who are doing their ordinary tasks, we may not be able to distinguish any difference between the righteous distracted and busy ones and the unrighteous distracted and busy ones. Both will be going about performing the same tasks when judgment will separate them and then some will be snatched up.

We even see a third metaphor in this gospel passage besides the tidal wave coming and the snatching of people while they work, namely, Jesus’ final coming which will be like a thief in the night. If we knew when a thief would break into our house, we would be on guard with alarms activated. But the final coming of Jesus will not trigger such alarms, necessarily. Waiting for the One who will come as a thief in the night can leave us feeling scared and ill at ease because of the unexpectedness of the arrival and the fact that it cannot be preempted or prevented, and its precise time cannot be predicted or pinpointed—and the “thief” could come at a time when our guard is down. Yet, this divine “thief” wants us, not our valuables. This thief wants our hearts and souls and minds. As well, this coming is at some risk to the “thief” given all the defenses we employ to protect ourselves materially, emotionally and otherwise. And, since this “thief” comes to give not take, the real threat isn’t outside of our door—rather, it is inside us, in our misplaced fears and misguided defenses. So, we are told to wait and keep awake, not to keep this intruder out, but instead to let Him in.

So, Christ the infant born in Bethlehem—the one who came long ago—is also the one who is to come: Christ the tidal wave, Christ the people snatcher, Christ the thief in the night. And he is loose in the world right now. Since no one knows when Christ will come again fully we need to keep awake, to be expectant—to

welcome him as he comes to us and in us here and now, and fully finally in the future, knowing that whatever judgment we will encounter will come from the One who loves us the most. Thus the judgment of God and the mercy of God are, in the end, one in the same. Of course, that final Advent is only known by, and belongs only to, God, who alone is responsible for its unfolding. We, for our part, are to be responsive to God's presence here and now by being responsible for God's gift of the present. In this we learn that the best preparation for the future is thus a wide awake embracing of the present.

Advent—the future coming—is thus an adventure, namely, a participation in that future now.ⁱ This parish of St. Philip's, coming into its 114th year, continues to engage in and ready itself for new adventures. Continuing to strengthen and develop ministries with an intentionality and quality that attracts both old and new members, we find ourselves in an advent and adventure of new challenges and opportunities. And in all this, we ourselves are changing.ⁱⁱ With all that is going on in our own lives and in life and work in this parish, there inevitably arise certain disagreements and, at times, controversy. The advent of new relationships, this adventure we are on together in our parish, will change things—and we will all be affected. But as we are hoping to find adventure—and Christ the tidal wave, the people snatcher, the thief in the night, the One who comes to us again and again, will give it to us if we don't run away—as we venture forth, we must realize that our unity as followers of Christ and as fellow human beings in this parish family is not based on unanimity nor uniformity, but rather on mutual love and respect, concern and regard. When we learn to struggle less for a personal point of view and more for the common good, it all gets that much more real. And it is that reality of our relationships with one another and with God that heals and unites.

In our adventures as a church community, we have made, and probably will make a few errors. But let me define error.ⁱⁱⁱ Error comes from a Middle English word "erren" which meant "to wander about," as in a "knight errant." This word evolved into meaning "going astray" and then into meaning "mistake." And the word "mistake" derives from an Old Norse word and once meant literally "to take the wrong road." But let's not forget that so many great things have been discovered by wandering about, and even taking the wrong road. This is certainly true in science, for example, where so many errors have opened up new worlds: Alexander Graham Bell was working on an apparatus to aid the deaf when he invented the telephone. And Thomas Edison was tinkering with the telephone when he invented the phonograph. Trial and error and discovery – a pattern just as true for human relationships and human organizations such as the church, as for science. If people keep alert and imaginative, errors can easily come about, but so also can the chance that it will lead to something new—a new insight, a new and possibly an even better way of doing things. Wandering and wondering are part of the same process, and I feel the ones who are most mistaken, most in error are, in the end, the ones who quit the adventure, who quit exploring. Our life and work together as we go forward in mission is not based on some precise road map designed to have us all travel a straight path and not wander off

exploring. Quite the contrary, our mission as a community of faith points us not to a true magnetic north, as it were, but rather to our deeply held spiritual values which we use as we do wander and explore and adventure forth seeking and finding new and renewed relationships with God, one another, and with those we do not yet know toward whom God is calling us.^{iv}

And so, our call to Advent alertness, awareness and preparing the way of the Lord in our hearts and in our world is also an invitation to accept fully our responsibility with regard to our times and invest each moment with its full weight of eternity. We are participants in God's presence and purpose, helping to create changed situations for the well-being of others, ourselves, and all of God's creation. The advent of Christ who has come and died and rose again, the Advent of the One who is present with us and who will come in fullness—this one Advent of the One who comes again and again is the Light who leads us in all our adventures as a community of faith, and in each of our own journeys, until Christ will come again and God will be all in all.

ⁱ Adventure—best understood from the Latin “res aventura” –something that is about to happen (to someone). I haven't even been here three years, but already this time has become an important part of my own adventure and faith journey. So far, I've had a marvelous opportunity to live life fully and observe what God might be doing in this parish and in the wider community day to day. In life and work here, I've tried not to miss seeing the journey that I'm on, or rather, the one we are on together, and God's presence in that journey, because I believe that any traveler who misses a sense of God's presence in the midst of the journey they're on, misses about all he or she is going to get in life. So, I've tried to be observant as I know many of you are. I've seen in my life two kinds of adventurers—those who venture forth hoping to find adventure, and those who go secretly hoping they won't.

ⁱⁱ I recall the wisdom from an old mentor who spoke to me on my first day of seminary back in Edinburgh Scotland. He said simply, “Don't think you can come here and not be changed.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of these perspectives are found in William Least Heat-Moon, Blue Highways (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1983).

^{iv} With many years as a community of faith behind us, we continue to move forward. And although we have come to a new Christian year on this first Sunday of Advent, this is not some “ho-hum” here we go again. I may have mentioned an incident that took place in England some years ago involving Mark Gibbs who wrote an interesting book entitled “God's Frozen People.” Gibbs was traveling through a number of ancient cathedral towns, and in one location he stopped at an old parish church and was met by the vicar who gave him a tour. At the end of the tour—and having described the parish's life—the vicar rather proudly stated, “What we have here is 500 years of tradition,” whereby Mark Gibbs couldn't resist as he untactfully replied, “I don't think so. What you have here is one year of tradition, and you've repeated it 500 times!” He made a point and that reminds me of the light bulb joke: How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Change! Change? My grandfather gave that light bulb! Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that tradition and well established ways of doing things are wrong or bad. In fact, often the opposite is true. What I am saying is that it is how we approach our tradition and familiar ways of being a church in either dynamic or static ways, that determines how positive or negative it can be for us now as a community in transition, and in the future. Or as Jaroslav Pelikan put it, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” [Jaroslav Pelikan “The Vindication of Tradition: 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities”] Jesus, who leads us into all sorts of new situations and challenges, new wanderings and adventures, is the one to whom the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of as

“the same yesterday and today and forever. [13:8]” Jesus who was and is and is to come is our dynamic tradition—old but also new, changeless but ever changing.

Looking over time, part of the treason of the church through the centuries was to settle in and settle for, to wait contentedly for something and someone in whom they hoped less and less; to organize rigid doctrines and self-assured institutions so as to wait as comfortably as possible; and finally, no longer to expect anything at all, but to settle in for business as usual.

To a number of people in our world and in the wider church any deviation from preconceived ideas, from standard assumptions and answers, from wandering off the marked route, is a mistake. To many, change means error. Yet we need to see that change, when it is necessary or natural, often involves error. We can see this in our personal experiences in observing how our families, parishes, communities and society work or don't work, and even in observing how the universe is. Biochemists, for example, hold that evolution proceeds by random genetic changes—errors, if you will—and that each living thing is an experiment within the continuum of trial and error and temporary success. In nature a new harmony—a new equilibrium that has been reached—that allows for survival and even a flourishing of life, almost always happens through change and error. Always to demand established routes and habitual ways is to go against the very grain of life. To engage in the continuing experiment of life, and life together, is to reach for ever broader, deeper and higher ways of living. So, we will all make errors and mistakes, but hopefully we will be the better for it.

Today's first lesson from Isaiah gives us a hint of how to move ahead with these changes and adventures—the only way is to travel toward what is coming toward us, and to go without our traditional defenses, but let them be transformed into whole new implements of creativity, as swords become beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:4). And it is our second lesson from Paul's Letter to the Romans where he would have us put on the armor, so to speak, of the light and love of Christ who will then lead us on our adventures.