

Advent 1 - Year C – November 29, 2015
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Advent Expectancy: The Absence and Presence of God

The season of Advent, the liturgists say, calls for four weeks of quiet watchfulness and anticipation—a waiting combined with hope and expectancy. It should reflect a mood of hushed tranquility and self-scrutiny that should lead to repentance and renewal. The problem with this pre-Christmas preparation is that the Gospel readings for this First Sunday of Advent—and the next two Sundays, as well—offer anything but sweet soundlessness. Not much quiescence at all! In fact, our Gospel today offers a Biblical version of “Apocalypse Now.” Jesus is coming, and is coming back; and sweetness and light are not to be had. When Jesus first arrives in Bethlehem, and will return on the clouds of glory in the might and majesty of the Final Coming; the whole cosmos has, and will, shutter and shake. Signs and portents of distress in the sun, the moon and the stars—extending to the nations of the earth and to the depths of the deep blue sea—will cause an unprecedented cosmic upheaval in those last days. And then God will be “all in all.”ⁱ Today’s gospel makes it clear that Advent is about much more than the coming of an innocent baby in a manger. Advent is of such significance that the entire universe reverberates with signs, as we remember Jesus’ first coming and anticipate his second, and final, coming.

Now having given a full-blown sermon on apocalyptic themes just two weeks ago, I want to shift us back to a focus on the meantime between the first and the final coming and to the awareness and watchfulness that this season calls us to as we discern Christ’s Advent here and now. Every year the Church celebrates the season of Advent, as we await the coming One—“Adventus,” meaning the Coming One, the Arriving One. Every year we pray the beautiful prayers of longing and waiting, and sing the beautiful songs of hope and promise, such as “O come, O come Emmanuel.” Every year we roll up all our needs, yearnings and faithful expectations into one prayer—that prayer in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke: “Maranatha” meaning “Come, Lord, Come.” After all the things that didn’t work out this past year, and here we go again into a new Church year—Come, Lord, Come.

Yet what a strange prayer this is! After all, the Lord has already come and lived and died among us. Yet, we still pray, “Come, Lord, Come.” And this longing, expectant cry comes as much from the depths of our hearts—our “hopes and fears of all the years”—as it did long ago from the hearts of our Hebrew forebears, the prophets and people who saw the Messiah’s coming day still far off in the distance. Indeed, Christ’s – the Messiah’s – coming is promised in the very first pages of Holy Scripture and yet, on the very last page of the Bible there still stands the prayer, “Come, Lord Jesus.”ⁱⁱ

Is Christ the eternal advent? Is Christ the One who is always still to come, but never arrives in such a way as to fulfill our deepest expectations? Has humanity drawn the least bit closer to God in the thousands and thousands of years that have elapsed since it began the search for God? And have we come any nearer to God in the course of our own lives?ⁱⁱⁱ Did Jesus come on the scene 2000 years ago like a comet that shares its brightness with us for a time and then trails away leaving the planet in the same infinite darkness that was there before?

Our Advent readings speak of a sense of absence and waiting in the midst of such absence. In our day we are faced with the pressing tasks to which we are summoned by the world's problems and conflicts; by present human misery; by socio-political, economic and environmental and other harsh realities—the solutions of which cannot be put off until tomorrow. And yet we are told in the Scriptures, and especially in this season of Advent, to wait!^{iv}

Now waiting for God is no passive thing, but something we do actively, like other types of waiting we do ordinarily in our lives.^v For example, waiting for a job opportunity usually means also brushing up on some skills or seeing how to get a foot in the door. Expecting a child requires protecting the mother's health, getting the house and other things ready, planning how to support another family member. Hoping to heal a relationship or an illness means changing behaviors, and taking the initiative to make it happen. Even sitting in silence at the bedside of a dying loved one demands the hard work of being totally present to another. Waiting is truly one of life's most demanding endeavors.^{vi} So, to expect something implies that some form of natural or human agency has done such and such so as to expect a particular outcome. But we know life often disappoints and even kills our expectations. And so, Advent takes us even beyond expectancy, beyond anything we could pull off on our own—to a promise of One who comes again and again, breaking through the confines of expectations. That leaves us a “hope breaking through the confines of expectations,” as Thomas Cullinan put it^{vii}—a way of living in full expectancy of the unexpected.^{viii}

We are called to be a waiting and expectant people. One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social and personal change. As Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, every society has its protectors of the status quo, its fraternities of the indifferent, its Bystanders Associations who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions, like the story of the long sleep of Rip Van Winkle through the entire American Revolution.^{ix} But today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas and the “facts on the ground” and to remain vigilant in facing our challenges. As a wonderful British resource called the Glenstal Bible Missal puts it,

“Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down....’ Once again at the beginning of advent, this cry reaches towards God, borne up by the assurance that our salvation has been achieved, though not yet fully worked out. This is because our God is a God who comes, and Jesus Christ is fully involved in this coming: ‘He is, he was and he is to come.’...Faced with the prospect of this Second Coming which can neither be predicted or prevented, faced with this lengthy vigil in the night of this world, whose end remains in darkness, the best thing for us to do is to remain always on the alert [and to live in full expectancy of the unexpected]. We must accept fully our responsibility with regard to our times and invest each moment with its full weight of eternity. Above all we should, like St. Paul, never cease to give thanks. But thanksgiving is not an expression of smug self-satisfaction. It is rather, an expression of gratitude to him who is the beginning and end of all things. Christians thus become the watchdogs of the world, a thorn in their century's side, overcoming sleep and igniting hope [and expectancy]. Come Lord Jesus!”^x

Thus, there is only *one* Advent of God and we are in the middle of it. It began in Creation, dawned in Nazareth and Bethlehem, and continues to the end of time. From beginning to end God has called and enabled God's people to inculcate the Spirit of Advent, namely, we are not simply to believe but to watch; not simply to hope but to expect the unexpected; not simply to obey, but to be awake...and to be awake for what? For that great event, Christ's coming with us, in us, through us; yesterday, today and tomorrow, as he is "the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come," as the Book of Revelation puts it.^{xi} The great mystery of our faith is this: Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ is Present, Christ will come fully again.

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23.

ⁱⁱ Revelation 22:20

ⁱⁱⁱ We have been told that God has already come, that his name is Jesus, Son of Mary, and that we know in what historical place and time we can find him. That's all true, of course, but this coming of his sometimes seems more like a going, more like a departure than an arrival, more like an absence than a presence. That God in Christ came some 2000 years ago doesn't seem like much of a consolation sometimes. God promised that He would come and actually made good that promise. But God didn't come the way anyone expected. God did it by taking on a human life as God's own, and became like us in everything: born of a woman, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He took up the very thing we wanted to discard. Contrary to all our hopes, he began what we thought would end with God's Coming, namely our human kind of life which carries with it frailty, self-destructiveness and death. He walked through every fleeting moment, so that he could live, suffer through and redeem it all, all the way to and through the bitter end. He, too, felt the terrible wheel of blind, brute human nature rolling over his life, while the eyes of human fear, ignorance, self-righteousness and malice looked on in cruel satisfaction. Is that what humanity and the whole of Creation have been waiting for? Was that coming our consolation?

Was his short, humble human existence from Bethlehem to Calvary really the coming which was to redeem humanity from all its failing, falling and dying? Is grief taken from us simply because Jesus wept, too? Is our surrender to death no longer a terrible act of despair, simply because Jesus also died? Does our road, which does not want to end, have a happy ending instead of a pointless or tragic or even catastrophic one, just because Jesus has travelled it with us or promises to be at the end of it at his Second Coming?

^{iv} We know what it is to wait today. It demands of us to remain with our high hopes that presently are unfulfilled frustrations or are even at a point where our worst fears are being realized. It demands patience in our impatience, and impatience in our patience—ever calling out like the SOS of people in danger: Come, Lord, Come.

^v For example, we wait for job opportunities to open up. We wait for our children to be born or come along. We wait for them to grow up and pass through certain phases. We wait for relationships and illnesses to heal and for animosities to end. We wait for election results and for leaders to change things for the better. We wait for loved ones to die. But rarely in any of these experiences can we merely "sit it out," waiting passively for what we expect will be.

^{vi} Waiting for God also demands an active wide awakesness, not only to the Lord who came so visibly long ago and who is to come, but to here and now where we are to see God's less visible yet real presence at work, often hidden in plain sight—all the while still feeling an absence. Advent takes us to a wide awake expectancy. Whether it was John the Baptist expecting the Messiah and expecting of others new ways of thinking and behaving in preparation—or whether it was Mary expecting her child—there is something here that goes even beyond wishful thinking. I recall the former coach of the Philadelphia Eagles football team, Ray Rhodes, saying before the opening game, "I don't hope we win quite a few games this season. I *expect* to win quite a few games this season." You see the difference? Mary, who, once she realizes she is pregnant doesn't then say, "I hope I'm pregnant." If you hope you're pregnant, you're probably not pregnant. No, she isn't hoping for a baby, she is *expecting* a baby. She has taken hope into the real, into life giving action.

vii Thomas Cullinan, OSB, The Passion of Political Love (London: Sheed & Ward, 1987), p. 114.

viii What we saw come true in Jesus of Nazareth at his first advent, by the power of his love, and God's capacity to conquer death by raising him as the "firstborn from the dead," as St. Paul put it (Colossians 1:18)—is what we will see come true for all humanity and the whole of creation at his final coming. However, in order to see that these two advents are somehow both consolation and challenge for us here and now, we need to recover our sense of hope here and now. Our Advent readings make it clear that an advent faith is not an escape from the world to a misty realm of slogans and comforts which declare our problems to be unreal and our tragedies nonexistent. The treason of Christians and the Church was to settle in and settle for; to wait contentedly for something in which they hoped less and less; to organize doctrines and institutions, rules and rituals so as to wait as comfortably as possible; and finally, no longer to expect or hope for anything at all. Yet we are called to be a waiting and expectant people, not a people who can claim to "possess" God already, though that temptation is ever with us no matter what religious tradition we come from. And it is in not claiming to possess that we can really meet God who comes to us and gives us the power of an expectancy—an expectancy not just to live in God's presence at some final time in the future, but here and now—living in full expectancy of the unexpected.

Here is where the recovery of the Advent spirit of expectancy happens in our lives. I have mentioned the Advent of the Christ in which God entered fully into the world in Jesus—"Emmanuel," - God with us—the Advent we remember just with Christmas, the advent which happened long ago. I've also mentioned the Advent which will bring the world fully into God at the end of time, the Second Coming. The first coming is that in which God in Christ came to seek and to save; the second coming is that in which God will come to take us to the fullness of union and communion with God.

ix See Martin Luther King, Jr., "The World House" in Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 170-171; used later by William Sloane Coffin (in The Courage to Love (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 90).

x Gerard MacGinty OSB, ed. Glenstal Bible Missal (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1983). It is in that awakeness and expectancy now that we see that God has not only come fully back then to seek and to save—and will come again in fullness far down the pike to bring us all into union and communion—but that God is purposefully present now, often hidden in plain sight. And so, we do not live in a time of total absence of God, or in a time of embittering, bewildering or boring delay in God's return. Rather, we live in this time of God's patience and purpose and presence.

Advent is an era that truly began with the longings of humanity; that came to a full dawn in Nazareth and Bethlehem; and is with us now to the last days. As our lives are a process unfolding from birth through all our life stages, so may we see the same unfolding of God's Kingdom, God's Realm. In the humanity of Jesus, which God made his own for all eternity, God has never left us. God redeemed us on Calvary. God comes to us today. God is present in our lives and in our world. We are called to receive God in our prayers and worship, our friendships of love and our relationships of respect with those familiar to us and the stranger at the gate.

xi Revelation 4:8