

Apostles Anglican Church  
1 Advent 2016 (11/27/16)  
John A. Roop

### THE WHEN AND WHY OF ADVENT

(Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 24:29-44)

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

I like simple things. I like things to *be* simple, which explains, in part, why I don't care for grand, sweeping, thousand page novels like *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Brothers Karamazov*. If a book has more than two or three main characters, if it has more than one plot, I get lost in it. I feel disoriented. I need a *dramatis personae* – a list of characters at the back of the book – to reorient me: “Oh, that's who that guy is, that's why he's important.” Without that kind of literary compass to reorient me, I'm lost. I like things to be simple.

We come today to Advent: a grand, sweeping story if ever there were one, with a cast of thousands and with intricately intertwining plots. It's easy – at least for me – to become disoriented in this season, in this story of Advent.

I find Advent *chronologically* disorienting; it disrupts my sense of time. The first Sunday of Advent is the first day of the new church year, so, Happy New Year! This is where the problem starts because I am immediately thrown out of sync with the secular calendar, which also governs my daily affairs. The church celebrates New Year's Day today, but the rest of the world waits until January 1<sup>st</sup>. And, in the church, this is Advent 2016, the first day of the church year of 2016. But, I've been living in 2016 for eleven months already. So, to help me keep track of all these chronological differences, to help me orient myself in time, I always buy a liturgical calendar, a church calendar that marks time according to the church year. This is the first year that the ACNA has produced its own liturgical calendar, and – I'm not ashamed to admit it – I was excited when it came in the mail.

When I opened it up, what did I notice? My new church calendar doesn't start on Advent 2016, but on January 1, 2017 like every other calendar they sell at the mall or Barnes and Noble. What gives? So, I find that my liturgical calendar corresponds to my secular calendar, and doesn't reorient me as it should.

Then there is the issue of how long the Advent season lasts, which is an important consideration for those who follow a discipline of Advent fasting. Advent always

contains four Sundays preceding Christmas. Because the *date* of Christmas is fixed, its day of the week varies, and that changes the length of Advent. Christmas falls on Sunday this year, and Advent lasts a full four weeks, the longest possible Advent season. Some years, when Christmas is on Monday, Advent is only 3 weeks, which makes fasting 25 percent easier, or at least 25 percent shorter. So, from year to year, Advent starts on different dates and extends different lengths – a little chronologically disorienting.

Time is not the only problem; there is also *theological* disorientation. The Old Testament lesson this morning, from Isaiah, envisions the time when:

[the nations] shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore (Is 2:4b).

But the Gospel lesson is part of Jesus' Olivet Discourse in which he speaks of wars and rumors of wars, of nations rising against nations, of tribulation and death, of final judgment as in the time of Noah, of the unexpected coming of the Son of Man to divide man from man and woman from woman – one taken and one left. Which is it: no more war or else war and rumors of war? Where am I in the story? I'm a bit disoriented.

The gradual Psalm speaks poetically of the unity, peace, and security of Jerusalem:

<sup>6</sup> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!  
"May they be secure who love you!  
<sup>7</sup> Peace be within your walls  
and security within your towers!"  
<sup>8</sup> For my brothers and companions' sake  
I will say, "Peace be within you!"  
<sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,  
I will seek your good (Ps 122:6-9).

But, our Gospel lesson is part of a discourse that begins quite differently:

**24** Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. <sup>2</sup> But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Mt 24:1-2).

So, which is it for Jerusalem: peace and security or destruction and ruin? Where am I in the story? I'm a bit disoriented.

Such is Advent – not simple at all. Like a grand, sweeping, thousand page novel with scores of main characters and intricately intertwining plots lines, it is easy to become disoriented in time and theology in this season of Advent. We need a reliable clock or calendar to tell us *when* we are in this story. We need a true theological compass to orient us in the plan and purpose of God in this season of Advent.

We have such a clock and such a compass, I think, in the Book of Common Prayer, in Thomas Cranmer's collect for the first Sunday in Advent. Listen to it again:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

What does the clock say? What does the calendar say? *When* are we in the story? The collect tells us that we are *now*, in the time of this mortal life, poised and lived in-between the two advents of Jesus: the first advent in times past when he came to visit us in great humility, and the second advent in times to come – on the last day – when he will come again in power and great glory with the angels, with the sound of the trumpet, to gather the elect, to judge the nations, to unite the new heavens and the new earth, to fulfill the psalmist's dream of a new Jerusalem to which all the tribes and nations go up, in which there is peace and security forever. Our season of Advent, in the time of this mortal life, encompasses both the first Advent of Christ in his humility and the final Advent of Christ in his glory.

These two advents, which we hold in tension during this season, give meaning to history and give direction to our lives. The collect situates us in the present, in this mortal life, between these two advents, between the dreaming of Isaiah the prophet and David the psalmist and the coming true of the Gospel.

So the question is: how are we to live now, in this mortal life between the visit of Christ in great humility and the return of Christ in great glory? Paul tells us:

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup>For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>10</sup>Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

<sup>11</sup>Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. <sup>12</sup>The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. <sup>13</sup>Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup>But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom 13:8-14).

Here are the great themes of Advent. Here is what we need now in the time of this mortal life in order to take our place in the grand story of Advent. Here is the clarion call:

Wake up. See what time it is.

Cast off darkness and put on light.

Love one another.

Now, in the time of this mortal life, now in this Advent season, wakefulness, light, and love reorient us and sustain us.

Jesus says:

Watch, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep (Mark 13:35, 36).

These are the first words that greet us at Morning and Evening Prayer during Advent, words of exhortation: Wake up for the night is far gone and the day is at hand; stay awake for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming; watch for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

When I was a child, my parents, elementary school teachers, and even Miss Kay on Romper Room taught me how to cross the street safely: “Stop, look, and listen,” they said – then run like crazy. The idea was simple. Streets are dangerous places and you have to be awake and aware – watchful – to navigate them safely. You never know when a car might come racing around a curve.

Advent calls us to stop, look, and listen – to wake up and be watchful. The world is a dangerous place, a place that will lull you into sleep or else keep you so busy and distracted that you live unconsciously, until the Lord comes unexpectedly and finds you asleep and unprepared.

“Wake up,” Advent calls. Stop, look, listen for God: in his Word; in his Sacraments; in your prayers; in his body, the Church, in whole and in each part – in your brothers and sisters, and in your own sweet life.

Teacher, preacher, and author Frederick Buechner writes in his memoir *Now and Then*:

If God speaks to us at all other than through such official channels as the Bible and the church, then I think that he speaks to us largely through what happens to us, so what I have done ... in this book ... is to listen back over what has happened to me – as I hope my readers may be moved to listen back over what has happened to them – for the sound, above all else of his voice.

Because the word that God speaks to us is always an incarnate word – a word spelled out to us not alphabetically, in syllables, but enigmatically, in events, even in the books we read and the movies we see – the chances are we will never get it just right. We are so used to hearing what we want to hear and remaining deaf to what it would be well for us to hear that it is hard to break the habit. But if we keep our hearts and minds open as well as our ears, if we listen with patience and hope, if we remember at all deeply and honestly, then I think we come to recognize, beyond all doubt, that, however faintly we may hear him, he is indeed speaking to us, and that, however little we may understand of it, his word to each of us is both recoverable and precious beyond telling (Buechner, F., *Now and Then*, p. 3).

Wake up. Stop, look, listen for the loud and clear voice of God in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ; stop, look and listen for the still, small voice of God in your own birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension *in* our Lord Jesus Christ. “Wake up,” Advent calls. Stop, look, listen.

We wake because the night is far past and the day is at hand. It is well past time to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. So calls Advent, whose most obvious, visual symbol is light. We put out the Advent Wreath – which we have on sale in the narthex for only \$10.00, candles included, by the way – and we light the four Advent candles symbolizing, in part, four Christian virtues: hope, love, joy and peace. Advent calls us to light and to virtue, calls us out of this dark world in which we live:

<sup>12</sup>For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12).

In this present darkness with its works of drunkenness, sexual immorality, sensuality, quarreling and jealousy – to mention only those dark deeds Paul spoke of – in this present darkness we need to shine.

<sup>14</sup>You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.  
<sup>15</sup>Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Mt 5:14-16).

In the midst of this crooked and twisted generation we are to be blameless and innocent, children of God, shining like stars in the universe (cf Phil 2:15). Just as the candles on the Advent wreath scatter the darkness with their flames, Advent exhorts us to scatter the spiritual darkness around us by the quality of our lives lived for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Put on the armor of light, Paul writes, and we know what he means: truth as a belt, righteousness as a breastplate, the gospel of peace as shoes, faith as our shield, salvation as a helmet, and the word of God as the sword of the Spirit.

There is a place in this dark world where only the light of *your* life will reach. There are people in this dark world who are waiting – though they may not even know it – who are waiting for you to shine. Let the light of the Advent candles glow, yes. But let the light of your life blaze forth, reflecting the glory of Christ. Cast off darkness and put on light; so calls Advent.

Wake up. Stop, look, listen. Shine. And above, Advent says, love.

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law (Rom 13:8).

In other words, own everyone everything, because love excludes no one and love withholds nothing necessary. How do we know this?

<sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:10-11).

If we love as God loved us in Christ Jesus, who will fall outside our love: the stranger, the alien, the immigrant, our enemy? Once we were strangers and aliens; once we were cut off from the commonwealth of Israel and the covenants of God; once we were enemies of God. But we were loved by Christ and we have been brought near by his blood. If we love as God loved us in Christ Jesus, what will we withhold from another? For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. Having received such extravagant, prodigal love, how can we parcel out our own love carefully, sparingly?

“Love,” Advent calls. Love as God loves you, with a reckless, raging fury that risks all, gives all, suffers all, again and again and again, world without end.

This is *when* and *where* and *why* we are in the story. Love – the love of Christ – is the pole star that orients us in this season of Advent and in every season of our lives.

It is the first day of Advent; we have four weeks to go: twenty-eight days in which to hear Advent call to us:

Wake up. Stop, look, listen.

Cast away the darkness. Put on the light of Christ. Shine.

Love. Love. Then love some more.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and

the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*