

Advent 1, Year A
November 28, 2010
St. Michael and All Angels, Portland
The Rev. Deacon Gabriel Lamazares

Isaiah 2:1-5 and Psalm 122 • Romans 13:11-14 • Matthew 24:36-44

Happy New Year!

And welcome to Advent once again!

Look around. Things have changed, haven't they? Oh, sure, same lovely people, same choir, same movements of this dance of liturgy, but the whole Gestalt has shifted. We've begun to focus on another telling of the Gospel, starting at, well, a beginning. The Good News of Jesus Christ has many beginnings to choose from, but in Advent we choose one of the places to start.

What if we imagine Advent as a new room we're coming into? Or perhaps an old room, a precious room we only come into once a year. But we're to live here for four weeks so let's settle in.

Now don't get this room confused with the Christmas room. That's a whole other room! That's right: the tree, Bethlehem, the Nativity Set, the carols. They're all in that other room, which is magnificent, but it's not where we are. Right here in the hearing of whatever Advent police may be listening, I will admit to having bypassed the Advent room entirely on more than one occasion to go right to the Christmas room. A lot of people do. But stay with me. I promise that the Christmas room will reveal itself all the more wondrous and magical and awe-inspiring after the Advent room, like you enjoy a festive meal more if you're a little (or a lot) hungry than if you've just stuffed yourself with artichoke dip. (Not that I've done that recently). Or the way you can see more stars in the night sky if you allow your eyes time to adjust to the dark.

As we look in, you'll notice that the lighting is generally dim, with a few spotlights on two pieces of art at the focal point of the room. The color scheme is purple and blue. Purple is the color of royalty and also the Church's traditional color of penitence, but the blue reminds us that, in this Advent space, we are not asked to renounce as many things, to face as many temptations, to open ourselves to testing as we do when we walk the path of the Cross in Lent. No, Advent is certainly a space in which to prepare, but it is a different, gentler preparation.

At the threshold we are given a new traveling companion who will stay with us not

just in Advent, but throughout the whole year. We've said good-bye to Luke with his medicine and his walking stick and his astrolabe, his charismatic warmth and speaking in tongues. This year our guide will be Matthew, who was supposed to have been a tax collector, but he looks more like a kind of rabbi. He's the most self-consciously Jewish of the evangelists, the one who saw Christ as a new Moses coming to renew and restore the fullness of the Torah. It is only in his Gospel that we'll see Jesus ascend the mount, like Moses before him, to teach the crowds in his Sermon that challenges every generation anew.

You'll notice that Matthew has a few linguistic tics, phrases that mark his speech. I'm sure you'll pick up on them as we go through the year, but here's just a couple. Matthew has great respect for the name of God, as a good Jew who was raised to never utter God's name out of respect for God's holiness. So, you'll see that he refers to "heaven" a lot, especially as Jesus talks about the "Kingdom of Heaven," rather than the Kingdom of God. It is also only in Mark's telling that Jesus calls the disciples by the goading but accurate nickname of *hoi oligopistoi*, "you of little faith." I find it so endearing, because it means he knows where I live!

Let me introduce you to our hosts in the Advent room. They resemble each other like siblings but they lived at different times, of course. The first is Isaiah, whose poetry we will be hearing throughout this month because it was his prophecies that helped the first believers to understand who Jesus was and what had happened to him and them. It was Isaiah who first spoke of an anointed one who would come to restore God's justice and peace on the earth.

His companion for the season is someone we've all seen from afar, mostly because that's the way he likes it. The prophet John lived at the same time as Jesus, dressed in skins and ate locusts and wild honey. He told the truth, he offered guidance, he withdrew from the centers of power. But most of all, he was convinced a new world was coming. To get his disciples ready for it, he would dunk them in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Promised Land touching every inch of flesh, between their eyelashes, between their toes, in their ears, weaning them from the world they'd known, another womb bearing them forth, ready for what's coming.

In this room, the two prophets form the most astonishing harmonic duo, trading themes back and forth, sometimes call and response, sometimes singing tense chords full of hope and warning that make people tremble and shiver with fear and longing.

Now, let's go to the focus of the room and sit with Matthew and lift our eyes to the two pieces that dominate the entire room, that call our contemplation.

The first is hard to look at. It is impressionistic, indistinct, but it conveys its emotional heft without mercy. Fire. Fire and ashes and grief. Perhaps it is the Temple destroyed, desecrated, the home of Israel's God on earth crushed under the boot of the emperors and potentates of this world. And Jerusalem undone, its people massacred or sent into exile, or worse, left behind in the ruins. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; may they prosper who love you."

Matthew and Isaiah both were witnesses to the ruin of the Temple and Jerusalem almost six hundred years apart. Isaiah saw the destruction and subjugation of Israel and Judah, the captivity, the exile, and the return. Matthew's grief after the final destruction of the Temple in the year 70 of the Common Era was compounded by the expulsion of Jesus folk from the synagogues that became the centers of Jewish life. "Two will be in the field; one will be taken, one will be left." One into exile, one into captivity, one to wander in secrecy carrying a new revelation, another to keep the home fires burning, both to rebuild, to rebuild, to rebuild, to seek the face and will of God in the ruins of the world.

The second image is one you've perhaps seen before: Jesus seated upon a heavenly throne, arriving in the clouds like a flash of lightning splitting the sky on the Last Day to see and tell the whole truth about the living and the dead, to receive all the honey we've made in the honeycombs of our souls and to grieve all that never was, the opportunities for love squandered, the vision dimmed, the hearts closed tight against the spring. Thank God the one who comes to judge us is human like us, bearing the scars of the stripes and agony and death he bore out of his immense love for our priceless dignity, dust and ashes bearing the image of God. Thank God it's him and not me.

But why? What does this have to do with Christmas? Why do we sit in this dark room and light candles and listen to prophets crying out? Why do we sit in silence and contemplate the desolation of the Temple and this Christ who comes to us from the end of time? Where's the baby Jesus? Where the manger? Where's the mother mild?

It's a good question. Here's what I think: in order to understand who this baby Jesus is, we need to remember the wound at the heart of Israelite history, which is partly our history. The promise of a Messiah doesn't make any sense without the victory of the empires, without the cruelty of their armies, without the ruthlessness of domination. If Jesus is the Word made flesh (and he is), that Word may be heard responding definitively to the exile, to captivity, to destruction. First and foremost, that Word is FOR us, FOR our rescue, FOR our flourishing, FOR our abundant life.

There's one more thing it helps to remember as we gaze upon the images of Last

Days in these shortest, darkest days of the year. In a very real way, when we're reading the Scriptures, *then is now*. What does that mean? *Then is now*. Look at the images. Were these singular events? Yes, the First Temple was destroyed in 587 before the Common Era and the Second Temple in 70 of the Common Era. These events will never happen again. Yes, I believe Christ will come again at the end of all things to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

But look closely. The reason we read these testimonies is because they represent not only events in time, but *also* because they point us to kinds of events in our own lives and the lives of our communities, ways of seeing what God might be doing among us. *Then is now*. If there's salvation then, there's salvation now. If there's heaven then, there's heaven now. If there's hell then, there's hell now. If there's death and mayhem then, there's death and mayhem now. And if there's resurrection then, you BET there's resurrection now.

Look at the burning temple, taste the ashes of its burning. It's not just a historical event. Where are the ruins, the wreckage in our lives? What homes have we left forever? What beloved dwelling places of God has time burned with its relentless flux? What is hope for if there's no mess that overwhelms us? It is out of those ashes that the Word of God sounds a song of hope!

And what of the Christ of Judgment, the Christ of the Last Day? That Christ is still eternally himself, the One who is Coming. The One who asks that we stay awake with him a few hours and be prepared for his coming is the same One who took flesh as a human infant, soft, speechless, without pretense or defenses, having crossed the expanses between God and creature for no motive other than love.

Then is now. There is nothing more important than meeting him, whether it's at the end of time, at the manger, at the cross, or in the Eucharist we will share in just a few minutes.

Let's spend some time in the silence of this spacious Advent room, pregnant with possibility, waiting for the One who is Coming. This time in Advent is a gift, a time to look around and see what keeps us from that meeting that we have namelessly longed for since we were being knit in our mother's womb. What gets in the way of our meeting? What can we let go of? Who can we open our eyes and ears to? What ancient grudge or enmity do we love to chew on? What nurtures our honesty, our gentleness, our kindness, our humility? As we try to identify and shed our shells and burdens in preparation for that meeting, we are in good company: prophets, evangelists, and our brothers and sisters. They have a song to teach us that is our song, then and now.

"O come, O come, Emmanuel..."