

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for November 29, 2015
The First Sunday of Advent ~ Year C
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Each year the Church conducts field exercises in anticipation of and in preparation for the coming of God's Messiah. The exercises always begin on the Sunday nearest November 30 and conclude on December 25. The goal of the exercise period, known as "The Season of Advent" is to be ready for the appearance of the Messiah on that day when his coming will be more than a liturgical experience. Advent is a time of preparation - to receive something incredible; the reliving of those generations of longing for God's Messiah foretold by the prophets, the glad tidings of his coming into the world, the promise that he will come again in time, to complete and perfect the entire creation.

We always begin the Advent Season by focusing on passages of scripture that announce God's fulfilling the promise to bring justice, righteousness, and redemption. The means shall be through a righteous branch of David; the coming of our Savior Jesus; the Son of Man coming in a cloud. What may seem inappropriate is the announcement of the apocalyptic end of all things and the coming of the reign of God. There is nothing here of virgin and child, of shepherds and heavenly choirs, but rather the shaking of heaven and earth in perplexity, fear, and foreboding. Yet, each year, Advent is begun with a Gospel reading from an apocalyptic discourse of Jesus. Why? Perhaps it is because we are not ready for mangers and shepherds yet. Perhaps it is to impress upon us that the coming of the Lord includes much more than the Christmas story, that Advent is God's doing, apart from all human calculation or designing, and that Advent is of such significance, the entire universe reverberates with the signs and circumstances of these events. His coming is not only to a simple manger in a sleepy out of the way village. His coming is also to places like Paris, Beirut, Mali, Syria, and Colorado Springs – places touched by terror, violence, and anxiety.

In Luke's account (Luke 21:25-36), Jesus describes terrible, awesome signs of the coming of God's reign. They are things which make us want to crouch down in fear, to run and hide, to escape. But Jesus says, "No." When we see these things, we are to "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." He wants us to know it is something to which those who believe in him may look forward. We want to stay awake, remain conscious, because we wouldn't want to miss the moment when the Sovereign of the Universe returns to our mundane world to liberate it and to rescue it from itself.

In spite of our sophistication and worldly success, redemption is something we still need. A Minneapolis clergyman quoted in *Newsweek* magazine said that he had noticed a growing number of young adults coming to his church services. He welcomes them, of course, but notes that when he preaches about redemption and conversion, they think in terms of bonds and securities. Maybe that describes some of you, too.

And, it isn't too far off-the-mark, because redemption does mean to "buy back." The word entered the religious vocabulary way back in the early days of Israel. If a person was sold into slavery, the only way that person could gain freedom was to pay a ransom price or have someone else do that for her or him. In fact, the words "ransom" and "redemption" are used interchangeably in the OT. The concept is the same; it involves payment for a life that has been released; that would otherwise have been condemned to bondage or death. The coming of God's Messiah is to give us back what God gave us in the first place, who we really are!

A mother noticed that her nine-year-old son was saying his prayers with more than usual fervor. “Why are you saying your prayers so well tonight?” she asked. The boy opened his eyes. “I’m asking God to make the Mississippi River in Russia because that’s where I said it was in my test this morning.” Such a bail out isn’t possible, of course, any more than it is possible in redemption to be so radically changed. Redemption isn’t getting something totally different, so much as it is getting back something is familiar, the person we were meant to be, who we really are, our true identity.

Each one of us in the course of living has had experiences, good and bad, that have taken that away from us. We have experienced betrayal and we have lost our ability to trust, our pride, our dignity, our moral convictions. We live with a kind of taint that won’t come off with soap and water. But, in our redemption when the Messiah comes, it will be washed off. And, even more, we will receive again the innocence and glory that is ours as children of God.

So, redemption is something to which we should look forward! We are not promised that we will escape the awesome apocalyptic events that precede the coming of the Son of Man. But, we are promised that we will pass through it knowing that our redemption is at hand. The consciousness of our immanent liberation allows us to have an attitude adjustment about the present circumstances, however awful or wonderful. Something better is just ahead. We are not to live our lives either in fear or complacency, but on tiptoe, awake, heads up, looking forward to the in-breaking of God’s reign.

A preacher encountered a mountaineer and asked him, “Are you ready for Judgment Day?” “When is it comin’?” asked the mountaineer. “Well,” said the preacher, “it might come today or tomorrow.” “For goodness sake, don’t tell the missus,” cautioned the mountain man, “She’ll want to go both days.” Redemption is something to which we should look forward, even more than Christmas morning!

And, our redemption is far off, but near at hand. As he greets us in the mystery of the Sacrament today, so he meets us at the intersection of Highways 22 and 89 on Monday afternoon. And, in this sense as in the ultimate sense, his coming into our lives is something to which we look forward! We should expect to see him and greet him every moment. We do not have to wonder if he will come. He’s already come and that in itself is awesome. When he came, he told us he’d come again—at the end of time, at the end of our wits, at the end of our patience, at the end of our career, at the end of life—to give us back the life which was ours from the beginning. What a time of liberation, when we are aware of his presence as well as his promise!

Some years ago a tourist visited the Castle Villa Asconti along the shores of Lake Como in Northern Italy. Only the old gardener opened the gates and the visitor stepped into the garden, which was perfectly kept. The visitor asked when the owner was there last. He was told, “twelve years ago.” Did he ever write? “No.” Where did the gardener get his instructions? “From his agent in Milan.” Does the master ever come? “No.” “But you keep the grounds as though your master was coming back tomorrow.” The old gardener quickly replied, “Today, sir. Today.”

The Christian life is lived not simply in the hope of some far off redemption out there, but one that happens at *any* and *every* moment of our life as God’s Messiah comes to take us by the hand and offer us a truly liberated life. So, we begin another Advent. Not rushing ahead to mangers and angels. But pausing to remember the larger context - that we can look up every day, every moment, because our redeemer is coming, in God’s perfect time, to restore us to perfect freedom.