

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for Christmas Eve ~ December 24, 2011
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

The season of Advent is ending, even as we speak. It is a season of waiting, expecting, hoping, preparing. But for what? We've been hearing a lot from the prophets during the past four weeks, telling about those who were expecting God to send a Messiah to deliver the Jews from their oppressors. Even tonight, we hear such a message from the prophet Isaiah: "His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." They were waiting for one to come to save and deliver them from their political enemies and establish their kingdom as THE kingdom over all the other kingdoms. Advent calls us to identify with those ancients who waited for one who would turn the tables, set things right, get the right people who worship the right God on the throne, once and for all. Here we are 20 centuries later and, if that's what we've been waiting on during Advent, we may be as disappointed as they were when the one who came didn't accomplish that agenda.

Maybe our Advent has been about a hope that something miraculous will happen tonight that will somehow change the world's political scene for the better. God knows something like that is needed. After all, God's prophets said God would, didn't they?

Maybe we have been waiting, expecting, hoping, and preparing for one whose revolutionary activities tend more toward the liberation and redemption of folks on a more philosophical, theological, or psychological basis. If so, we may have come here tonight with some anticipation that something is going to change inside us because we were here. After all, doesn't the Bible promise us inner peace?

Or, maybe our Advent has been so busy with parties and shopping and activities that we've just been looking forward to tonight so we can finally get some rest. Advent can certainly be exhausting, so consumed by frenetic activities that we hardly have time to think much about lies at the end of it, other than for the pace to return to normal.

Whatever your Advent has been about, the end is here. Whatever you may have been expecting – a new world order, inner peace, a change of pace – it's time to see if expectations have been fulfilled.

You who are parents or perhaps siblings know that there is a big gap between expectancy and delivery, between a baby shower and a baby diaper. You have moved from the hope to the reality, from the yearning to an assignment. We love babies. We love the baby Jesus best of all. There he lies in a manger, "the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." No claim, no truth, no demands upon us. But when that babe of Bethlehem grew up, when the anticipation of, "Mary, you are going to have a baby" was transformed into "World, we now have us a Messiah!" well, it wasn't that easy for us. We get Christmas cards with the baby Jesus on them and words like, Joy and Peace. But can you imagine a Christmas card with the words from the adult Jesus?

"Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, then follow me. Merry Christmas."

"Whoever takes up the sword, dies by the sword. Happy Holidays."

“Take up your cross and come after me. Seasons Greetings.”

As we reach the end of Advent and come here to celebrate Christmas, expectation turns to fulfillment. “Jesus is coming” turns to “Jesus is come.” When that happens, expectation becomes assignment. And we begin to realize that the new world order, the peace that passes understanding, and all the frenetic activity finally converges in this night and in a babe lying in a manger who grew up to make some pretty serious demands upon each and every one of us. We’ve been living on the verge of something and here it is! Has all our preparation made us ready for it? Well, whether it has or hasn’t, we’re here. Christmas has come!

A bishop once spoke of a priest who “spent forty years living on the verge of ministry.” He just never got the church where he could minister. “Forty years waiting, forty years complaining, forty years on the verge,” lamented the bishop. How many people do you know who spend years “on the verge” of being a disciple of Jesus the Messiah? “One day, some day,” they say. When we get the right church, when we get the right priest, when we get the right feeling, when we get the right answers, when we get everything right then we’ll finally find fulfillment in our Christianity. Advent is about being on the verge of something. It’s about being on the verge of the Christ event. It’s about being on the verge of making some real, tangible changes in the way we live out our discipleship. It’s about being on the verge of knowing the peace which passes understanding. It’s about being on the verge of having the kind of church, the kind of clergy, the kind of resources, the kind of world, the kind of family, the kind of constellation of emotions to finally, finally, finally do some-thing about the thing Advent is all about. Namely, it is about discovering at the end of the journey to Bethlehem what the shepherds and wise men and parents of the Holy Child all discovered at that first Christmas.

Advent is about coming TO the manger. Christmas is about what we take away FROM the manger. The shepherds went away rejoicing and telling others what they had seen and heard. The wise men returned to their country by another way amazed at the wonder of it all. Mary and Joseph had figured out how to raise the Child. And, for you and for me, who have come here tonight to hear the news, receive the gift, struggle once again with the mystery of the incarnation, Christmas happens when we can’t live on the verge of it all any more. We finally, once and for all, have to go out and do something about it.

This is Christmas. This is the fullness of time. This is the night when we exchange our expectation for an assignment. The incarnation means that God has come to us in the flesh. The incarnation also means that when we know that, we stop living on the verge of ministry and roll up our sleeves to make the Word flesh in the living of our lives. For when he is born in us, the political scene changes because he empowers us to become peacemakers. And when he is born in us we find inner peace because we stop trying to be imitators of Christ and become innovations of Christ. When he is born in us we discover a way to cut through all the frenetic activity of life and focus our greatest hopes and energies on the one thing that makes it all meaningful.

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today. And may your birth, Holy Jesus, transform the world around us and the world inside us so that your kingdom indeed may come and your will be done, on earth, in and through us, as it is in heaven. Amen.