

Sermon #2

Advent I, Year C;

29 November 2009

Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

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“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near.”

In the name of the one Holy and living God. Amen

What are you waiting for? What are we waiting for, and when it comes, how will we know it?

This is a beautiful season. Advent is, I think, my favorite season. I know I've said I have other favorite seasons before, but I mean it this time. It is a beautiful season in our gathered life, and it is made beautiful because of the gorgeous, gorgeous promise we have that God is going to cause something new in our lives and in the world, our lives which seem so tired, so hard to be in so much of the time, so sad. God is about to do a new thing, and God is telling us what it will be like...it will be nothing short of glorious.

God is about to do a new thing. And mostly, I think, we are expecting something. I'm expecting something but what it is I don't really know but I have to have hope that it is something much more glorious than I have ever asked or imagined. Though the process may be painful and require deep change, disruption, upheaval, sacrifice, loss. On the other side of these things, say all the voices of the Bible, say our tradition, our prayers- from Jeremiah, to Jesus, to Paul,- what is coming, what is on its way, is a peace, a healing, a joy, a light, a restoration beyond all human telling.

And so we are advised to keep awake. To listen, to watch, to turn off if we can, the static of our lives. To wait, to wait for God's presence. The Word Advent is variously translated...it means a coming, an arrival, a drawing close. The biblical word for this drawing close is *parousia*, which means, a standing alongside, a presence. We're awaiting something beyond us yet within us, and among us, something that is to come from above, from out of the blue - or perhaps from below us. And it's going to draw along beside us; a presence. Presence, a big word- *presence*.

It happens now and then to me, and I'm sure it's the same with many of us. A friend, a brother or sister in Christ, or a relative, faces a terrible, frightening diagnosis. The phone rings and you may hear terrifying news of a major, probably tragic loss. There's been an accident. Or the impending possible loss of someone so close, so dear, so vulnerable that

you hardly even want to mention it in church. The frightened, grieving person asks you: "How can this be? How can I survive this? How? Why?"

If you're at home in Advent, if Advent has done its great work on your soul, then you've come to know that when that call arrives, or when that news happens, that there is precious little you can say. There is precious little you *will* say; except...*you will not be alone*. You will not be alone, there's a presence. I love, we love, God will love and will not leave you alone. There is, there has been, there will be a coming, an Advent, a drawing close, a presence. And of course at first that answer, those words probably will not satisfy. They will leave that person, perhaps you, hungry, feeling empty. But if you're persistent, if you keep watching, if you keep waiting, if you remember to breathe- the presence will come. There's prayer. Food. Visits. Chores, You stand up, because your redemption is drawing near. You stand up to meet that time. You stand up to being silent. You stand up to offering simple, no counterfeit explanations. You stand up to meet that time knowing that there is indeed a joy that upholds even the sorrow. *This* is Advent. And *that* is holy. A presence- it requires no explanation.

Parenthetically, when I was in Jerusalem last month our group of other clergy and preachers walked down the Mount of Olives, down into the Garden of Gethsemane, the scene of Jesus' agony in the garden and there's a church there called the Church of the Agony. And there among the hundreds of tourists and tour guides who had big radio telescopic anteni with flags so tourists would know which guide to follow, and the guides were yelling, some with microphones and bullhorns explanations: "this is the tree that was here two thousand years ago, and this is the exact spot where Jesus prayed and wept, and this is, rright here where the X marks the spot where the kiss of the betrayal took place-etc.etc a lot of noise." There's a lot going on, and as you walk into the Church of the Agony, on a pillar just like this, there's a sign in block English letters that simply says "Please no explanations in church." We took pictures of it, it showed up in Facebook, and we all thought we should just have that written on our pulpits: "no explanations." Advent is a time to give up explanations. To wait for this presence- which is love, which is in our hunger, which is in our longing. It meets our longing. It's the same shape as our hunger and our longing and yearning for God. We who are at home, we who strive to be at home with things of ultimate meaning, are made to be aware of what is truly essential. What are we waiting for...we are waiting for Jesus to show up. We are waiting for the Presence, made known to us in the giving, the blessing, the breaking, the sharing of what we call the real Presence in this sacrament, at this table.

What are you waiting for? Let us be careful that we await the things that really bring true life. Let's not settle for false, empty presents, let's wait for the real presence. Which is about to come. In fact, it's already here.. Take a moment, take a breath. Acknowledge who you are sitting next to or in front of or behind. That's the presence of Christ; the Holy Presence. If that person was not here you, I would be, we would be diminished. We'd feel less. Yet that presence, if it wasn't here it would still be here. Even in its absence- that's just mystery. There are people who come from some distance during the week when our doors are open and it's essentially an empty church, but they come and they sit, they kneel and they pray *in your* presence, the presence left behind by *your*

prayers, by *your* longing, by *your* hope. It's *real*. It's real in a different way than the oak of those pews is real. But it's real non-the-less.

So let's not rush this season. Those of us who have been in love, or who are in love, or who desire to be in love, (I think that's just about everybody-right?) know something of presence. It's the sitting at a table across from your beloved in a place like Amherst Coffee for instance, where there's not a lot of words, but just gazing dreamily into the beloved's eyes..That's a lot- it doesn't get much better than that.. (teenagers remember that, that's enough.)

Presence. What are you waiting for? What are we waiting for? We can celebrate this waiting; the fulness of it. This is a time to relish, to steel our hearts, to tune our ears, to wait for the signs of God's coming. The peace vigil which has taken place for over thirty years across the street, we pass by it- it's a sign, it's a sign of a longing and a working,, of rolling up our sleeves to work and pray for the Kingdom. Wait. In our waiting we will find all the fulfilment and all the joy we need.

In closing, I want to share a poem by the American poet Galway Kinnel. It's entitled, "Wait," and it was composed when a student of his was in a crisis after a relationship collapsed and she was considering ending her life.

Wait.

Wait, for now.

Distrust everything, if you have to.

But trust the hours. Haven't they
carried you everywhere, up to now?

Personal events will become interesting again.

Hair will become interesting.

Pain will become interesting.

Buds that open out of season will become lovely again.

Second-hand gloves will become lovely again,

their memories are what give them

the need for other hands. And the desolation

of lovers is the same: that enormous emptiness

carved out of such tiny beings as we are

asks to be filled; the need

for the new love *is* faithfulness to the old.

Wait.

Don't go too early.

You're tired. But everyone's tired.

But no one is tired enough.

Only wait a while and listen.

Music of hair,
Music of pain,
music of looms weaving all our loves again.
Be there to hear it, it will be the only time,
most of all to hear,
the flute of your whole existence,
rehearsed by the sorrows, play itself into total exhaustion.

May we have a blessed Advent.