

LIVING WITH HOPE
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Today we begin the season of Advent. The word Advent means “the arrival” or “the coming.” It is a word which speaks of a time of waiting, watching, and hoping for something that is yet to come. Advent is the season during which the church prepares for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a strange time of year for us. All around us are the signs of a world that goes just a little crazy this time of year. The shopping malls have already begun to fill with consumers in search of those perfect Christmas gifts. Holiday music surrounds us on television, radios and in our stores. The houses and the yards of our neighborhoods come alive with thousands of tiny little lights and plastic Santa Clauses, reindeer and manger scenes.

And yet, these things have little to do with the real meaning of Christmas. Not that there is anything fundamentally wrong with these things. But in the midst of it all, as people of faith, we must always remind ourselves that these things aren't the real reason for Christmas. For behind all of this activity there is a deeper story. It is a story of the light that comes into the darkness to bring light, and new life into our lives.

We must also remember that in the midst of the darkness, injustice and hopelessness of our lives, there is a God who seeks to turn things around. There is a God who seeks to bring light into the world. There is a God who seeks to restore justice into this world. There is a God who seeks to give all people reasons to feel hopeful again.

At first glance, we may even wonder what our readings in Advent have to do with our preparation for Christmas. Take today's Gospel lesson for example. It begins with these words:

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. (Luke 21:25-26)

These kinds of words and images seem more consistent with an understanding of the second coming of Christ, in the midst of chaos and judgment. They are far from the image of hope, peace, love, and joy that we normally associate with the first coming. So what do they have to do with Christmas?

The passage goes on to read:

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. (Luke 21:29-30)

What do fig trees and the coming of summer have to do with Christmas? Isn't this the season of fir trees and wintertime?

And then we read:

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:34-36)

What do unexpected traps and needing to have the strength to escape all these things that will take place have to do with Christmas?

In truth there is great wisdom in this passage. And that wisdom is contained in several se key words and passages:

- "Raise up your heads, for your redemption is near." (Vs. 28)
- "Know that the kingdom of God is near. (Vs. 31)
- "Be on guard so the day does not catch you unexpectedly." (Vs. 34)
- "Be alert [so that you may] stand before the Son of Man." (Vs. 36)

These words remind us to be ready for the kingdom of God that promises and threatens to break into our lives at any moment. This kingdom will be bring an experience of all of the things we long for: peace, joy, justice, hope, etc. Yet we are warned that if we are not alert, we may miss the signs of the kingdom in our midst. If we are not prepared, we may not have the strength and readiness to stand before the Son of Man.

What we celebrate in Christmas is the First Coming. Jesus as the Messiah, born in a manger in Bethlehem, is the announcement and the guarantee that the promises of god are being fulfilled. Our actions do not bring the fulfillment, which the New Testament calls the kingdom or reign of God. It is coming because God is bringing it. We are called to get in line with what is already breaking in to human history and will come to fruition at the Final Advent.

In truth, it isn't easy observing Advent during this holiday season. When you observe advent, you read lessons like we have today, and you sing songs that aren't the most cheerful or up-beat. They are somber reminders of the real world that many of us face, rather than the imaginary world that we see displayed all around us during this Christmas season.

And yet these words contain more hope than most of the words we hear spoken during this season. For soon the lights will come down, the shopping malls will become less crowded, the celebrations and get-togethers will cease, and gift-

giving will diminish. For some there will even be a post-holiday depression when all of the activity dies down.

But here in the church, we will remind ourselves that Christmas does not end on December 26th. For if Christmas is about hope and peace and justice and joy, then Christmas is celebrated every day in the kingdom of God. In the meantime, our job is to prepare ourselves, look for the signs of new life breaking into our old lives, stay alert and watch for that time when God's kingdom will come once and for all.

"Come thou long expected Jesus, Come!" AMEN