

Advent is a season for waiting on God. This sounds strange, but that is exactly what we have. The word, “Advent,” derives from the Latin word for coming near, or approaching. As the church currently practices things, and in the popular mind, it is a season for getting ready for Christmas. If we go way back in church history, Advent started in order to provide a penitential season before Christmas; it was to be the Christmas equivalent to Easter’s Lent. Soon, it took on the tone of being a season to prepare for the Lord’s Second Coming, and that tone largely colors Lent as a penitential season. We see this clearly reflected in the lessons that the lectionary gives us for Advent.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. We light the first candle on the Advent wreath. If you listened closely to the lessons this morning, you heard two different themes. I like to think of these lessons as reflecting what I call the two poles of Advent, a pole of hope and a pole of dread. Isaiah tells of a day that will come when the world no longer knows war. That sounds strange to all of us. Rare is the generation that is not, in some way, shaped by war. The history of the world is a history defined by conflict. But Isaiah promises a different world. Isaiah said that the day will come that God shall “judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” The classical Christian belief is that this prophecy speaks to that day when Jesus shall come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom shall have no end. We affirm this in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. In God’s Kingdom there can be no warfare. In God’s Kingdom, we will have perfect peace.

We have known so many wars recently and throughout history. There have been few years that nations somewhere did not make war. Can there ever come a time when we will all lay down our weapons and resolve our differences peacefully? We hope so and this longing for the realization of what we call the Kingdom of Christ on earth is one theme of Advent. In this sense, Advent is a reminder that while we are getting ready to celebrate the Nativity, what we are really preparing for is our Lord’s Second Coming and his eternal peace. However, much more pragmatically, from our perspective, we are preparing for that special meeting with our Lord that must occur for all of us when we transition through death. The Christian hope is that it will be a peaceful and that our Lord will find us ready and acceptable.

The opposite of that hope pole is, of course, is the pole of dread. What if we are not ready? What if we are not prepared to meet Jesus? What if our Lord does not find us acceptable? The Christian message is that the only guard against damnation is salvation in Jesus Christ; and while the work of salvation is our Lord’s alone, the responsibility for preparing ourselves for our decisive meeting with Jesus is ours, alone.

The reading from Matthew, this morning, reminds us that the judge of nations shall come at an hour that we do not know. In Matthew, our Lord reminds us that two men will be in the field; one will be taken into heaven, the other left out. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken into heaven, the other left out. The Gospel asks us this question; "Will you be ready?" That puts a heavy load on us. We cannot set aside the reality that we must prepare for Jesus.

I like to think of life as a journey in the tension of these two poles, hope for salvation and the dread that sin might somehow prevail. For the unredeemed, those who transition from life through death unprepared, there is no hope, so how do we prepare? How can we be hopeful? Listen to Saint Paul's comments to the church that he founded in Rome. We heard them in the Epistle this morning. Paul is reminding them that the time is short. He tells them that love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, they should prepare for Jesus by standing in love. Salvation, Paul says, is near. "The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." The armor of light is the perfect love of God, manifested in the Risen Lord. If we wear the armor of light, we live in love: the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Advent is a time for putting on the light of Jesus Christ. The symbolism of the candles on the Advent wreath is intentional. Symbolically, we are lighting the way in our souls for the coming of the Messiah. We are waiting upon God. We will have our meeting and it will be sooner rather than later. As Paul said, the night is gone. The day is at hand. Our concern is with meeting Jesus, now, in this life, and being with him in our transition through death.

Our preparation began with our baptism. It has been affirmed again and again as we've walked the Christian way. We have been encouraged and nourished, along the way, by the absolutions of our sins, by the bread of life of the Eucharist, by the word of God active and alive in our neighbors and us. But, the season of Advent reminds us that the pilgrimage is not yet over and we cannot rest until the journey is done. *Amen.*