

The First Sunday of Advent, Year B, 2008
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Today we begin the season of Advent and the first Sunday of the new church year. In many ways, Advent is a strange season, one with which the church struggles. We just are never really sure what to do with Advent. You see this struggle in the lessons, particularly in the gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent. It is always an apocalyptic reading from one of the gospels, regardless of the year. Apocalyptic literature is the strange stuff about the end of the world, a heralding of doom and gloom expected to pre-stage the Lord's Second Coming. That expectation was very strong in the earliest days of the church, but unless you are of the sort that thinks that the return of Jesus is only a matter of days away, this type of literature doesn't seem especially meaningful. What it does to Advent is give it a penitential shape, making it a season of the *mea culpa*. It encourages us to practice self-examination and acknowledge our failures to a forgiving God. In other words, there is an aspect of Advent that is a mini Lent.

But at the same time, in this strange season, the church tries to step away from the penitential, remaking Advent into a season of increasingly joyful anticipation of the celebration of the birth of the messiah. In many liturgical churches, today, the penitential color, purple, has been replaced by blue, because blue conveys more of a sense of joy. A favorite Advent hymn is "O come, O come, Emmanuel." Emmanuel means "God is with us," and acknowledges the presence of God in the messiah, Jesus. That is very good news and a cause for joy. As we move through the Advent season, the anticipation of Christmas draws us more and more into the season's joy because we know that the messiah ransoms us from sin and death, making us a new people, a redeemed people and there can be no better news.

So we have these two poles, on the one hand anxiety about being caught unprepared to meet Jesus and, on the other hand, excitement, because the season draws us into the presence of Jesus. We call this the season of waiting. The word "advent" comes from the Latin word meaning "coming." This is the season of the Lord drawing near.

On a personal level, I think that this is a very good season for self-examination and spiritual preparation. In the Gospel today, Jesus said to watch, prepare and make ready. The reality is that we do not know when the time will come and how it will come, and how we will meet Jesus, but we do know that he will come and that we must stand before him and give him a reckoning of how we lived our lives. But, at the same time, we should understand that in Christ we have nothing to fear if we trust him and give ourselves to him as Lord and redeemer. So as we wait, for Christmas, for our Lord's coming again and perhaps most importantly for our very personal and eternal meeting, let us realize that this season can help us to grow daily in faith, in hope and in love, in Christ our Lord. *Amen.*