

The First Sunday of Advent, Year C, 2009
Luke 21: 25 – 36
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

This is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a season of waiting on Jesus, waiting for him to come again as well as waiting to celebrate his first coming at Christmas. For us, it is a mixed season and the mixture contains its own dose of anticipation and dread. The traditional approach to Advent is penitential, and traditionally, the readings for Advent have a strong hint of the Apocalypse – a belief that God is going to step in and clean things up! Apocalyptic literature is very much a part of the Bible. Both the Old and the New Testaments contain it. Apocalyptic literature arises from chaos, *angst* and dread. It is a literature of confusion and fear. But, in Scripture, the apocalyptic always expresses the hope that is the product of faith: God will deliver his people.

We encounter the apocalyptic again, today, in both the Old Testament passage and the Gospel – much more pronounced in the Gospel. In our reading from Luke, we are told that the Messiah will come, again - the Second Coming. Luke's Gospel was written probably sometime between 80 AD and 100 AD, during a time of intense persecution. Christians thought that if they could remain faithful and not renounce Jesus through fear or torture, then they would see the Second Coming of Christ and live into the reality of God's Kingdom on Earth.

The apocalyptic literature gives us the earliest understanding of Advent. Advent means "coming." Advent is the season of waiting on Jesus and preparing to receive him as King. Does this understanding have meaning to us, today? I've said many times that I believe our world is as chaotic as any time in history. We do not know, from day to day, when or where the next terrorist attack will be. We live in a world of clashing cultures and a tension that is unparalleled in human history. For the Christian, the only answer is the peace of Christ. We hope and we pray that his peace will come soon. For the Christian, there is no answer to the chaos except Christ.

There is a second understanding of Advent that is dominating, today. It is dominant because it is not based on dread. This is not the original understanding of Advent, but over time it became the normative understanding. Advent is a season to get ready for Christmas. Christmas preparation must be more than shopping, wrapping, cooking and writing Christmas letters. Christmas is the birthday of our Lord. If the joy of Christmas is not grounded in faith and is not primarily a spiritual joy, there is danger that it becomes a narcissistic joy. The focus shifts from Christ to culture, and a demeaned and materialistic culture at that. Advent focuses us on the spiritual and directs our preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

There are other ways of understanding Advent that are equally meaningful and important, but seldom does the Church use them to explain Advent. I do not understand why. Advent should remind us that we meet Jesus in our neighbor. Jesus said that when we serve others, we are also serving him. Advent should challenge us to prepare for Christ

by seeking Christ in others, by being Christ to our neighbors, serving them as Christ served us; loving them as Christ loves us.

A fourth level of Advent is, I think, the most personal one of all. I sometimes think of the Advent wreath as representative of the stages of life. In our Gospel today, Jesus reminds us that we know how to tell the signs of summer from the leaves on the trees. I think of the first candle, blue or purple as it may be, as the stage of young life. The branch gives forth its buds. From the buds come the new leaves, filled with the hope of life - young, vigorous, hopeful, teleological and therefore determined in their development. That is the spring of our existence. Then comes the summer, strong, green vibrant leaves, filled with life and enjoying the full days of summer. If one lives life well, these are grand and seemingly endless days. But, with the calendar of life there comes the fall, the third candle. The life cycle has nothing to do with the Church's choice of pink for the third candle, but that reason is essentially lost to us, anyhow. I think of it as symbolic of the leaves of fall. In all their beauty and all their glory, the reward of life well-lived, they will yet all too soon turn brown and await the certain winter wind that will blow them to the ground. All that is left of life is the center candle, the white one, the light of Christ.

These themes come together in the magnificent dance of Advent. Advent is not one theme or the other. Advent holds these together in a spiritual minuet that leads us to the Messiah. Advent is a season to reach for Jesus, knowing that Jesus is our hope, our joy and our life. *Amen.*