

Christ Episcopal Church  
Dayton, Ohio  
The First Sunday of Advent  
November 29, 2009

Thanksgiving has come and gone . . . or mostly gone, depending on how many leftovers you still have. Black Friday has come and gone. The Christmas Children's Parade and lighting of the community tree is over. And now we're seriously into the Christmas season and Christmas spirit . . . except when you go to Church, of all places.

Here there are no carols playing . . . no Christmas lights shinning . . . no Santa Claus . . . no manger scene with Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. What we have here are these lessons about the coming of the Lord, apocalyptic texts about the Second Coming of the Lord of Heaven, judgment, and righteousness.

“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)

(I dare you to read this at the office, neighborhood, or family Christmas party.)

It would be kind of hard to make a carol out of it or to put it in a Christmas card. The disconnect here is that culturally we are preparing for a celebration of the first coming of Jesus . . . the one described in the beginning chapters of Luke's gospel that speak of angels singing sweetly to shepherds watching their flocks by night—about the baby to be found in a manger wrapped in swaddling cloths.

But the Church is drawing our attention to the Second Coming that is forecast for the end of time when

“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. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’ (Luke 21:25-28)

So Advent is preparation for two comings of Jesus. The first is well taken care of by the culture. But the Second Coming is the one to which our attention is drawn today. And as one writer has observed:

Luke wrote with a deep and growing sense that Christian discipleship is a kind of living in between—aware of Jesus, waiting for Jesus, and coming to know this Jesus for whom we wait in the midst of an eventful, unpredictable, even tumultuous world, waiting to stand before him, yet not always knowing where he is.<sup>1</sup>

Living as we do, in between the first and the second coming—we live with uncertainty. Oh, we try mightily to have everything nailed down and wrapped up. But God is always on the move. Out ahead and beyond our formulas and descriptions.

Isn't this the message of the burning bush where Moses asked God who was speaking to him from the bush. The reply is often translated, "I am who I am." But one scholar has recently pointed out that the phrase

"... is a Hebrew idiom that expresses deliberate vagueness. The remark, "They went where they went," for example, means "I have no idea where they went." So when Moses asked God who he was, Yahweh in effect replied: "Never mind who I am!"<sup>2</sup>

And that's why later Jews refused to speak the name of Yahweh, for to do so would somehow limit, confine, define the Holy. The great sin is idolatry. The commandment is to not make unto ourselves any graven images, to bow down and to worship them.

And whether the idol is a crèche scene and Christmas as we've always known it, a church building and the worship arranged or done in a certain way, a Bible understood as the immutable, unchangeable word of God—God is always moving on.

Here in Luke, chapter 21, the verses for today's gospel reading are set in the context of a discussion on the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 'As for these

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley D. Avram, writing on this Luke text in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 22

<sup>2</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 39

things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’ (Luke 21:5-6)

In fact, by the time that Luke penned these verses, the Temple, the center of Jewish life, culture, and identity had already been destroyed by Roman legions in the year 70 C.E. So once again God’s people were set adrift and forced to rediscover life, culture, and identity without the sign and symbol of God’s presence among them—which now lay in ruins, along with the city that had contained it.

As the destruction and desecration of previous temples and multiple defeats and exiles had proven, time and again, present arrangements and current understandings will end, God cannot be contained, and in the words of the old hymn, “time makes ancient truth uncouth.”

Famine, wars and rumors of war, genocide, millions in exile, disease, human trafficking still dominate parts of the world—along with the greed, mental illness, and poverty that we never seem to avoid.

And so we begin a new year. As we prepare to celebrate the first coming of Jesus, these four weeks of Advent remind us that we people of faith are called to stay awake, be alert, to discover signs of the divine in this in-between time. The Jews of the late first century had to go in search of the Holy—to find the dwelling place of God now that his temple was no longer.

The Christians had also worshipped in the temple—so they, too, came to realize that the dwelling place of God wasn’t in stone—but in the one they called Emmanuel: God with us.

But where is Emmanuel today? Certainly not confined to a child in a manger, not limited to Jesus of Nazareth who is no longer physically among us, and not to be so until he comes again with power and great glory. So where is the Holy to be found in the meantime?

Be awake! Be alert! Be on the lookout for signs of Emmanuel. This is the task of God’s people as we enter this new year of God’s time.