

This Sunday is a Sunday of new beginnings. Yes, it is the last Sunday of November, and yes that means we still have one more month of 2020 to get through, God help us, but it is also the first Sunday of Advent, which means that it is the first Sunday of the Church Year. In church terms, today – not January 1st – is New Year's Day. So today, the First Sunday of Advent, is a fresh start, a new beginning. And that is, as always, a very great gift, and I will come back to it at the end of this sermon.

But first, what about Advent itself? What is it all about? Advent is a very short season in the Church Year, only four weeks long, which means that it sometimes gets neglected. Advent is like the little brother or little sister in a big family: it gets pushed and shoved around a lot, wears hand-me-down clothes, and has to fight to get any attention. Advent is squeezed between Thanksgiving on one side and Christmas on the other, and so most people view Advent as simply the hallway through which they must walk to get from one big turkey dinner to the next.

And, in a sense, that's right. The two things most people associate with Advent – Advent wreaths and Advent calendars – are really nothing but time-keepers. You light one candle of the Advent wreath each week, moving on toward the climatic lighting of the Christ candle. You open one little flap of your Advent calendar every day, but that is only to heighten the suspense as you move toward December the 25th. It's like prisoners marking off the days with hash-marks. When can we open the presents and start singing Christmas carols? *Not yet!*

But, in another sense, that's the *wrong* way to look at Advent. Advent shouldn't just be a passageway between dining rooms, or a pre-Christmas prison, but a proper, dignified room in the house on its own. Advent should be loitered in, savored, and enjoyed. The word 'Advent' means 'coming' or 'arrival,' and it has two themes. The first theme is the first coming of Christ, in the past, at Christmas. Christ as a helpless, vulnerable infant. The second theme is the second coming of Christ, in the future, on Judgment Day. Christ as invincible judge and conqueror.

Christmas and Judgment Day are two very diverse themes for one short little church season to hold together. Advent strains at the seams like we do after finishing off the whipped cream and pumpkin pie of our Thanksgiving dinner. It's almost too full, too rich.

And, to make things even more complicated, when we celebrate Advent, all three tenses of past, present and future combine. It's enough to make you dizzy.

So let's pause for a moment and consider this season in yet more depth by looking at the Collect for the First Sunday of Advent. The original version of this Collect was composed in 1549 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, and so Anglican Christians have been praying this prayer on this day for 471 years. If this was a Eucharist we would have heard it at the very beginning of the service, and thus before the sermon, but as this is Morning Prayer we will hear it later, toward the end, so listen for it:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; though him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

The collect begins, 'Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness.' These first words remind us that the Christian life is lived by *grace*. The first note of Advent – and so the first note of the whole Christian year – is grace. As our lesson from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians begins, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' But what is grace? Grace is undeserved favor. Grace is God's mercy and love for us. Grace is God's creative compassion, God's awesome ingenuity in figuring out how to fix the mess we've made of our world and of ourselves. And the climax of God's grace is Jesus Christ.

But Jesus Christ comes to us in time, and I said earlier that in Advent all three tenses of past, present and future combine. We hear them in the rest of the collect.

First, the present: the collect says, '*now* in the time of this mortal life.' The action is set firmly in the present, in the midst of this life. It is now, now, now that we must cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Not later, but now. This collect highlights the urgency of the present moment as only time we have. We only have 'now,' we might not have 'later.' So what are we waiting for?

Then the collect looks back to the birth and life of Jesus: ‘now in the time of this mortal life, *in which* your Son Jesus Christ *came* to visit us in great humility.’ This time of our mortal life, with all its trials and tears, is the very same life that Jesus condescended to share with us so long ago. Why? The Nicene Creed says, ‘for us and for our salvation.’

And, finally, the collect looks ahead to the future: ‘that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.’ This is the second great theme of Advent, and the theme of this morning’s Gospel lesson: the second coming of Christ.

Now, we Episcopalians are shy of making too big a deal out of the second coming. We do proclaim our faith in it every Sunday when we recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist or the Apostles’ Creed at Morning Prayer – ‘He will come again to judge the living and the dead’ – but we don’t go around wearing sandwich boards which say, ‘The end of the world is nigh!’ And we get nervous around people who are preoccupied with predicting Armageddon and the Apocalypse.

But if you look at the Gospel, that’s exactly what Jesus warns us against as well. Don’t engage in too much speculation, he tells us, for ‘about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’ Therefore, he says: ‘Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.’ That’s the the whole point. We don’t know – nobody knows. That’s why Jesus tells us to ‘keep awake’.

Advent, therefore, despite its brevity, is a rich and full season. It’s not just the intermission between meals. It’s not just the prelude to Christmas. It’s a time of remembering the past, and a time of anticipating the future. It’s a time to start anew, and a time to get ready. But of course, I cannot conclude without acknowledging that this is not a regular Advent season that we are beginning today, because this has not been a regular year. The pandemic has disrupted our normal lives in many ways both small and great, bringing everything from minor inconvenience to economic catastrophe, trauma, and loss; and regardless of whom you voted for in the various elections and your personal political convictions, we face a bitterly divided country as well as fractured families and friendships, an ongoing democratic crisis that is testing the very foundation of our whole society.

In short, 2020 has certainly been the most difficult year many of us have ever faced, and while 2021 promises to be better it will be several months at least before anything resembling normal life is restored. So what does Advent have to offer us in this particular moment? Two things: renewal and hope.

I've already said that Advent offers us a fresh start, a new beginning, and that is indeed something that we all need right now. Of course we cannot snap our fingers and make the virus disappear, our political divisions cease, or economic problems go away. But we can each individually take this as an opportunity to self-assess, evaluate, and seek to reboot our own patterns of life. As I said, the First Sunday of Advent is the New Year's Day of the Church Year, so what in our life needs to go out with the old, and what needs to come in with the new? How can we be more loving, more generous, more kind, more patient, more considerate of others in the coming months? How can we deepen our relationship with God through Scripture, prayer, and worship? These are the questions we should be asking ourselves.

And, second, hope. I've focused mostly on the Advent theme of grace so far, but Advent also promises hope. As Christians, our hope is not in ourselves, and not even in doctors and economists and Supreme Court justices and presidents, but in God. We believe that our lives are ultimately in God the Father's hands. We believe that we both need and have a savior in Jesus Christ. And we believe that God is present with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Maybe this is a time to really *realize* all of this in a way that has often eluded us or been obscured by distractions, and thus to truly *lay hold of* our hope in God's love, mercy, grace, and goodness in the midst of this enormous and, yes, overwhelming challenge. Maybe all this is a chance for us to learn what it actually means to put our hope in God. I hope so!

Let us pray:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; though him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.