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November 27, 2016

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We begin the season of Advent with readings that direct our gaze to the ultimate and the immediate realities of our lives. The first Sunday of Advent always looks to history's end. For Christians that's not the stuff of scary movies but the anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ, which we believe will bring all of creation to its fulfillment. The first Christians thought they were on the threshold of that day and made plans accordingly. That's one idea behind Paul's telling the Romans, "Our salvation is near." In today's Gospel Jesus says, "Stay awake! At an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." Watching day and night for the end worked for a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, but there comes a time when even the most faithful can't keep standing on tiptoe. Seeing signs of the end in every cul-de-sac does not usually lead to a peaceful and productive life.

The Christians of the second and third generation had to radically realign their expectations, realizing that if they had been right, their grandchildren (not to mention us) would have never existed! When we join them in carefully checking what Jesus had to say about the end, we discover that he was remarkably sparing when it came to details. His only unequivocal statement was: "You do not know on which day your Lord will come."

The conundrum of this reading makes me think of some of my Ecuadorian friends, people with disabilities who live at the base of one of the most active volcanoes in South America. Mount Tungurahua is either smoking or rumbling at least 50 percent of the time and the towns below are always on alert — with the danger level moving unpredictably from yellow to orange to red and back. They tell me that they have learned to live with it. They have their backpacks ready with water, medicines, flashlight and matches. They all know the routes to safety zones. They stay prepared and do their jobs. Some women really grind corn like those in the Gospel, others work at the computer or give physical therapy or teach very slow learners. Life goes on even as they remain vigilant, alert to what could change everything in a flash. Such living has taught them to be watchful without being nervous, an emotional balancing act that flowers into wonderful gratitude for each day and hour because they know how precious and precarious life is.

Today's readings invite us to focus on the end, not to emphasize our vulnerability but to remember where we're going. That's what Isaiah is trying to teach his people as he paints a picture of life as it is meant to be. Isaiah addressed a people who had lost faith because they'd lost their prosperity. Isaiah tried to teach them that prosperity based on injustice has nothing to do with God. With words as majestic as any music Handel ever composed, Isaiah painted a vision of Jerusalem as God's capital city where all the nations would come to worship and learn to live in peace. And then, lest they sit contentedly in their rockers humming "The Impossible Dream," Isaiah shouts, "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

Paul echoed Isaiah's last idea with his wake-up call to the Romans. At a time when Christians were expecting the triumphant return of Christ at any moment, Paul tried to help them keep their balance between their daily life and what was to come. That's the essential tension of the Christian life: to appreciate the moment for all that it is worth in the light of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Advent calls us to remember what we so often repeat in our Eucharistic celebration, "Christ will come again." That means that creation is genuinely headed toward fulfillment. It means that Isaiah's vision of the peace of converting weapons into farming tools, roadbuilding machines and construction materials is not only possible, but that God is offering us a strategic plan for its accomplishment. Paul calls us to wake up to that reality. Jesus tells us to be attentive to the possibilities in every moment.

What we know for sure is that God's future will happen and will come about in unexpected ways. The folks who live at the base of the volcano can give us hints about trying to be prepared. They know that someday — tomorrow or in 500 years — Tungurahua will change everything around it because the volcano is alive. We believe the same of the Kingdom of God. The invitation of Advent is to remember our future so that it can transform our present.

ISAIAH 2:1-5

Israel, God's chosen people, gave the world a new understanding of time as a qualitative progression. When other cultures understood time as cyclic, seeing the human experience of endless rounds of birth-growth-decline-death as a mirror of nature's ever-repeating succession of days, months, seasons and years, Israel proposed an alternative. With faith in the Creator God who was involved in history, the cycles broke open and time was understood as movement toward a goal. Given her experience of God, Israel refused to believe that there was nothing new under the sun. The God of Israel not only got involved with people but actually gave their history a direction and a purpose. In its most simplified version, the biblical revelation is that creation came from God and is oriented toward fulfillment in God. That little philosophical digression is important as we begin the holy season of Advent, the season of remembrance of God's presence and hope for the future. It also sets the stage for our first Advent reading from Isaiah.

The Prophet Isaiah lived about 700 years before Christ in a time of great national crisis. Israel's political downfall shook the faith of the people who believed that God had given them their land and dwelt there among them as their protector, no matter what. Israel reasoned that their defeat meant that God had been overcome. Isaiah's response was that God had not fallen to Assyria, but rather was using Assyria to punish Israel for the injustice that marked their society. The Book of Isaiah opens with a description of the wickedness of the people and the ruin they have brought upon themselves by it.

After a description of decadence so graphic that it should be rated PG at best, Isaiah announces that God's anger will not last forever. God will refine the people in the fiery furnace of trials and then restore them. Isaiah goes on to describe God's promised future in one of the most famous poetic visions in all the scriptures. The days to come that Isaiah portrays are not some far off heaven, but a real promise he offers the people so that they will dream and hope enough to bring their new future

into being.

Everything Isaiah promises has to do with God's glory shining through the people. First, as mentioned above, this promise has to do with history; it's not a fantasy nor does it belong to some alternate reality: This will happen in real days that are coming. God's future is tangible.

Second, the place where God dwells in the midst of humankind is "the highest," a place that no other reality can overshadow. It becomes the center of the world in the sense that the goodness of its atmosphere will attract all nations and peoples. What God has to offer the human community will prove worth seeking, worth the climb it takes to get there. What people will discover there is the wisdom that only God can offer, the instruction that gives meaning to life.

The final promises Isaiah describes have to do with erasing the boundary lines of enmity. God will judge among the people and having learned God's ways they will be at peace.

The Book of Isaiah has other similar promises just as it has other accusations of infidelity. The challenge in Isaiah's day as in ours was the cost, the difficulty of faith. Just as Israel's understanding of God implied that history has a direction, God's future proposes novelty, an alternative to the endless cycle of wars and fear and violence. Isaiah ends this visionary promise with an exhortation: "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" The vision will only take flesh through human effort in collaboration with God's grace.

The God revealed in the Jewish and Christian scriptures offers possibility, not certainty. The weakness of God's promised future is that it depends on human hearts and heads, hands and feet. God has instructed us, but our hearts and heads have to give God's dream a home. Then, when God's project has fired up our hearts, we need only put our hands and feet to work to make it come about. If we don't believe it is possible, if we are not willing to take part in making it come true, we might as well admit that religion is only a show or an opiate.

ROMANS 13:11-14

We might say that Paul's message to the Romans ups the ante on what Isaiah said. Paul thinks that the world as it is, what he describes as the night, is the abode of

sleepwalkers. They are there, but don't really know where they are or what they are doing. Gerard Manley Hopkins said the same in his poem "God's Grandeur": "The world is charged with the grandeur of God ... Why do men then now not reckon his rod?" Hopkins finished his poem with a line that explained exactly what Paul wanted the Romans to perceive: "The Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

An important key to Paul's spirituality is that for him nothing, absolutely nothing, was the same after Christ's resurrection. Salvation, what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, was permeating reality as really as the dawn brings light. In Paul's thinking, salvation was not an end product like a heavenly reward, but a life process already begun and growing in individuals and communities. People had but to perceive it and choose to be a part of it.

In this passage, Paul's exhortation to good conduct is not a harangue, but a reminder about the sort of relationships that characterize people of the light. His talk of orgies, promiscuity and rivalry points out the attitudes that ruin Christian life: celebration with no object beyond sensuousness, sexual relationships not oriented by love, and relationships with others driven by egoism and ambition. "Make no provision" for these, he says, don't save those party dates or put the supplies on your list for the market.

The metaphor of putting on Christ is one of Paul's favorites. He may speak of it as putting on the new humanity (2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 4:24, Colossians 3:10), of having been crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6), or of being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). All of those ideas express an urgent invitation to Christians telling us to get beyond our bogged down past so as to become what we really are. We can be people awake to the presence of God within us, people who rejoice as God draws us forward into the fullness of life.

MATTHEW 24:37-44

Today's reading from Matthew skips over the line most scholars see as the first of this short selection: "But of that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father alone." (Matthew 24:36) As one commentary noted, the end of the world is a pretty big deal for God to keep secret from Jesus and the angels! That unknowing fits right in with the aphorisms we hear in this short reading. The only definitive thing Jesus says about "that day" is that the disciples

should stay awake and be ready for it.

The examples Jesus used in this selection are even more confusing than typical parables. When he talked about Noah it was pretty clear that the people on the losing end of the deal were those who ate and drank and married instead of building an ark. But in the examples of the men working in the field or the women at the mill, it's unclear whether to "be taken" is reward or punishment. The final example about the thief in the night is pretty clear — nobody wants to be robbed. We're left wondering if and why Jesus might want us to think of him as a burglar...

Apparently the thrust of Jesus' teaching is to say that there's no point in speculating about the end. The only thing for sure is that it will come at an unexpected time and in an unexpected way. It seems that the gist of the message is "Live as if you were going to die tomorrow and as if you were going to live forever." That's the truth.

Christians are called to live in a strange equilibrium, loving life and every bit of God's creation while holding it lightly because we know it is destined for transformation. Advent invites us to remember the long and the short of it. We look to Christ's return in glory but don't worry about the details. Instead we keep Isaiah's vision in mind, allowing it to orient and lead us to participate in making the things of this earth all that they can be.

Planning: First Sunday of Advent (A)

By Fr. Lawrence Mick

This year offers us the fullness of Advent. Since Christmas falls on a Sunday, Advent will last four full weeks, as long as it can be. This allows a bit more time for preparing Christmas liturgies, but it also allows us to enter fully into the season of Advent itself.

Presiders, planners and preachers might take a little time before Advent begins to decide how to focus the season. There are different ways to understand Advent. Some still see it as a "pretend" time when we are waiting for Jesus to be born at Bethlehem. Some see it as a "little Lent," a time of self-denial and penance. Some see it as a time to long for the Second Coming of Christ, giving the season an eschatological tone. Some see it as a time to prepare for Christmas, hopefully including some spiritual preparation along with all the shopping and Christmas

cards.

Each of these may have some degree of validity, though some are more in tune with the readings and the history of Advent than others. What perspective do you want to share with the parish this year? What will be most beneficial for them spiritually? Parish leaders need to clarify their own understanding of the season if they hope to share it with the parish as a whole.

One fertile perspective might be to focus on preparing to receive the Lord who is already here. The idea that Christ is absent from any point in history does not accord with the Scriptures (see last week's column, for example). But we are often not in touch with the divine presence in our midst. It's not that Christ is not here but that we are often not really here! Trying to become more aware of Christ's presence in our daily lives may be the best preparation for celebrating Christmas with joy and thanksgiving.

Advent begins a new liturgical year, too. This year we will use Cycle A of the lectionary, so we will focus on the gospel of Matthew for most Sundays. What will you offer your parishioners to enable them to delve more deeply into Matthew's account as we move through the coming year? Could someone prepare a series of bulletin inserts, perhaps one a month, that focus on the section of Matthew being proclaimed that month? Are there Bible Study groups in the parish who could be encouraged to focus on Matthew, at least for the start of the year? Can you make commentaries on Matthew available for purchase by those who prefer to study the Bible on their own?

AIDS: December 1 is World AIDS Day each year. Though other diseases often claim our attention, millions around the world are living and dying with AIDS. Include them in the petitions this weekend.

Prayers: First Sunday of Advent (A)

By Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

As we begin this Advent season, we focus on the universal spiritual practice of being awake—deeply aware. It's not that we're sleeping, but that it's so easy to become distracted by the ordinary demands of life—especially in this holiday season. It is so easy to overlook what is truly most important, but staying alert is hard. God is always present to us; Jesus comes in many guises, many ways. If we're not alert, we miss it all. What will it take to keep us focused?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you urged your disciples to stay awake: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you told them to watch for the Son of Man's return: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be always alert for your coming: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray that this holy season will make us alert to Christ's coming through the needs and concerns of all people.

Minister For the church: that we may be a focused and watchful people during this Advent season...with waiting hearts, we pray,

- For those who are alert to opportunities for justice and meeting the needs of the poor and disenfranchised...with waiting hearts, we pray,
- For the millions around the world living and dying with AIDS...with waiting hearts, we pray,
- For those who keep us aware, whose voices prod and disturb us...with waiting hearts, we pray,
- For eyes that see the signs of God's action in our world...with waiting hearts, we pray,
- For those who can lead us into national unity in this time of disunity...with waiting hearts, we pray,
- For the grace to be alert to the needy, the sick and the dying in this community and wherever we venture each day...with waiting hearts, we pray,
- For those who have died...(names)...and those who grieve for them...with waiting hearts, we pray,

Presider God who is ever present, we need your help to stay focused in the midst of compelling distractions that confront us every day. Grant us the capacity to see the

face of Jesus wherever he appears among us, and help us to live this Advent season in fine-tuned awareness. We humbly ask this in his name. Amen.

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