



by Mary M. McGlone

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There's an old joke with lots of variations that says that kids were out playing in the parish yard and they saw Jesus coming. They ran into the church offices and excitedly told the secretary. He looked out the window and then ran to the DRE. The DRE hurried into the administrator's office and pointed out the window. The administrator then burst into the pastor's office with the crowd trailing her and said, "Jesus is on the playground and he's headed for the office! What shall we do?" The pastor, startled, dropped his agenda, and seeing everybody in high fluster turned his chair and looked out the window. Suddenly he stood up, grabbed his hat and stole and car keys, and shouted, "Look busy!"

That's not far from what Jesus says in today's Gospel: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come." Jesus compared the coming of the Son of Man to a master who left his servants in charge of the home front. Ironically, while the householder left all the servants with jobs to do, Jesus warned that the master could well return during their time off — dinner, late-night, pre-dawn and dawn. About the only people who worked those hours were fishermen. (Except, of course, the mothers who were on 24-hour call for babies and the sick.)

The precise times Jesus mentioned just happened to be key moments in the passion he was about to undergo. The passion events began with an evening meal at which

he told his disciples that he gave his life for them. He asked his friends to keep prayerful vigil with him in the night. At cockcrow Peter denied knowing him. On one early morning he was condemned and on another, three days later, the women discovered that he had been raised. It was only during one of those moments that the disciples actually fell asleep, but in each of them they either missed or denied the deeper meaning of what was happening.

The key here seems to be to pay attention to what is happening, no matter what time it is. In our first reading, Isaiah laments the way people have gone astray, forgetting God's call and presence among them. He begs God to rend the heavens, to wake the people up to what God is trying to form them to be. Pope Francis puts that and Jesus' call into contemporary terms in *The Joy of the Gospel* when he says: "I do exhort all the communities to an 'ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times'. This is in fact a grave responsibility" (EG #51). In the same paragraph, he goes on to say, "This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also — and this is decisive — choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil."

Advent is probably the Church season most vulnerable to corruption and being overshadowed by everything that coincides with it. Whereas the Church starts to celebrate Christmas on the night of December 24 and continues through the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, society rolls into holiday mode after Halloween and into uncompromising materialism beginning with "black Friday." Our cultural Christmas ends abruptly on the night of December 25 — leaving only the tree that nobody wants to take down. Ironically, there is nothing more distracting from the mood of Advent than our culture's preparations for Christmas.

Our readings remind us that as of today we are not simply getting into the commercial Christmas season but entering into a season of conversion. Isaiah's prayer calls on God to be the potter forming the clay of our lives. Jesus calls us to be alert to God's unexpected appearances in our lives. Pope Francis tells us it is time to discern the spirit of the age in order to increase the good in the world and thwart evil tendencies.

How do our readings orient us to enter into this Advent — the shortest one possible? Traditionally we talk about Advent as a time of waiting. This week's readings emphasize watching — watching for the signs of God's presence, watching for the ways in which God desires to act as the potter of the clay of our lives. Jesus told the

disciples that the master could show up at any hour — when we should be at our task or in moments of well-deserved rest. The task of discipleship then is not so much to be busy as it is to stay alert.

ISAIAH 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

Today's selection from one of Isaiah's prayers of lament begins with a phrase we may too often take for granted, thereby missing its profound implications. Isaiah says, "You, Lord, are our father." That declaration says as much about the people of Israel as it does about God. This statement modified everything the people would think about themselves as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This redefined them as something other than related clans or the nation Moses led out of Egypt. When Isaiah declared that God was their Father, he defined them as a people united by a spiritual bond that originated in God and God alone. Whether or not they were related by tribe, whether or not they could call themselves a nation with territory or governance, whether or not they shared a common language, the very core of their identity came from God's relationship to them as their father. They were who they were because of their shared relationship to the God who gave them being, who guided their life together and called them to be a people.

In the very next breath, Isaiah says "You are our redeemer." That called to mind the myriad of times that God rescued this people from Egypt and from other enemies throughout their history. In Isaiah's worldview, God controlled history. Isaiah laments that God had allowed this people to wander – not the wandering of the desert, that long learning period that prepared them to enter the holy land, but wandering away from God. Calling on God as their Redeemer reminds them that God, and God alone, can be trusted. They know this from their history. As redeemer, God and God alone can rescue them from what they have brought on themselves. The gist of this part of the prayer begs God to act like the God they know. Their hearts have become hardened, but God can break through that. The cry, "Rend the heavens and come down!" is a way of saying "Remind us of who you are! Re-instill in us the fear of the Lord that trembles at your greatness. Make us your people!"

Underneath this lament Isaiah knows that God's love and faithfulness are deeper and more powerful than the people's sin. They may be delivered up to their guilt, they may be suffering the consequences of their sin, but God is still their father. God's grace will win out because God is the potter and they are the clay.

As we begin Advent, Isaiah invites us to join him in lament, to recognize our own communal wandering from God. He reminds us that when we avoid being mindful of God, even what we think of as our good deeds end up being like “polluted rags,” a sham rather than the works of a humble and sincere heart. Isaiah speaks this entire prayer/poem in the first person plural. As he prays, he identifies with his own people in all their sin and all their potential. He invites us to do the same, to take responsibility for who we are as a people and a Church, to admit the ways in which we are wandering far from God’s ways and to ask for God’s grace and an awareness of God’s presence.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9

Paul’s letter writing was a very different activity from tweeting or texting. While it may have been electric in its power, it was much more serious than email. To understand the composition of his letters, we should remember his historical context. Not everyone had the ability to write or even to read. Paul, like other writers, generally had a scribe taking dictation from him and the polish of his phrases and thoughts suggest that what he put in writing had been through a long process of thought and preaching before it was commended to parchment. Unlike our omnipresent paper, the parchment he used was expensive, as was the ink made from a combination of carbon, water and gum arabic, which is also a sweetener — this adding to the sense of the word of God being like honey.

Writing was serious business. What Paul put in his letters had surely already been tried out in preaching and discussions. His expressions had been honed through repetition until they were ready to commit to writing. Thus, while his ideas may not have been new to his readers, writing things down reminded the communities of what they had heard from him and preserved a permanent record of his advice, preaching and admonitions.

Paul gave such care to his writing that every word had been carefully chosen, and the salutation of a letter was as much a theological statement as it was an address. When Paul opened his letter to the Corinthians saying, “Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” he gave us words we frequently use in the liturgy and to which we not may have given great consideration.

Paul’s greeting “Grace,” (*charis*) imitated and transformed the normal letter salutation, “Hail” (*chairein*). It implied: “This is an unusual letter and it has

theological importance.” For Paul, grace was synonymous with God’s gift of salvation. Peace was the result of that gift. In a world in which the emperor claimed to be the people’s savior and the bringer of peace, Paul’s greeting was subversive. He proclaimed that humanity could know the fullness of life only through a loving relationship with God. By starting his letter this way Paul summed up everything he wanted to tell the community. The rest of the letter simply filled out the details.

MARK 13: 33-37

“You do not know when the Lord of the house is coming.” Is Jesus making a promise or giving us a warning?

Jesus spoke about the master’s return after telling his disciples to remain watchful and alert. The master left servants in charge of his affairs, giving each of them their own work and assigning one to be the vigilant gatekeeper. Ironically, while the master expected everyone to do their jobs, the times at which he suggested that the master might return were non-working hours: dinner, midnight, pre-dawn and early morning. Then again, the times he mentioned were the precise hours when important events of the passion took place. The evening was the time of the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples. It was night when Jesus prayed and the disciples slept until his arrest. Cockcrow was most famously the time of Peter’s test of faithfulness. The early morning was the time of the meeting of the council that handed Jesus over; two days later, early morning was the time of the women’s journey to the empty tomb. Each of these hours represents a crucial moment in the disciples’ relationship with Jesus.

In Jesus’ own life, each of these moments was revelatory. Each of them focused his ministry and the meaning of his life. In the evening, he revealed himself as the one given for his disciples; at night he exposed his frail humanity and need for solidarity; at cockcrow he was misjudged and mistreated by people in authority and betrayed by his own. Finally, presenting both his trial and the discovery of his resurrection as events that happened in the early morning, the Gospel hints at the immense disparity between the human and divine verdicts on Jesus. Evening, midnight, cockcrow and morning were key moments for understanding who Jesus was and how he hoped his disciples would respond to him.

As we begin Advent, the Gospel calls us to be alert and watchful. When Jesus told the disciples that they needed to be as aware in their time off as during their

working hours, he let them know that serious discipleship will refocus their entire life. Disciples who want to be ready for the master, who want to notice the signs of God's presence in the world need to imitate parents who cultivate an ongoing awareness of their little ones. Parents and those who care for the frail and elderly don't have to dote unceasingly on the person they are caring for, but they have to keep one ear constantly attuned for any call that demands a response.

In this season so full of glitzy distractions, the Gospel reminds us that God's ongoing advent into our lives is not bound to a calendar or even to a liturgical schedule. There's no predicting the moment when God will show up in our lives. We never know at what moment the Master will be seeking our faithful response.

Planning: 1st Sunday of Advent

By: Lawrence Mick

Advent is here, but it won't be here long. This year is as short as it can be. The fourth week of Advent will be only one day (actually less than a day if you have Christmas Eve Masses earlier than your usual Saturday Mass). So it behooves us to make the most of the three full weeks we have for this season this year.

Will the environment of the worship space this weekend proclaim the change of season? Will people entering the church recognize quickly that Ordinary Time is over and the season of preparation is here? Though they are very different seasons, there are still some similarities between Advent and Lent. Both use violet vestments, both call for minimal décor and restrained music, and both are preparatory periods.

Today's first reading and Gospel also remind us that Advent is a time for repentance and new beginnings. Advent does not have the deep penitential character of Lent, but it does call us to prepare for the (second) coming of the Lord, which should prompt us to ask how ready we are if he comes during this season of longing for his return in glory.

The first reading is a strong call to renewal. "Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?" "Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind." These words are balanced somewhat by the ending: "we are the clay and

you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.”

That reminds us that God always is ready to forgive and invites us to spiritual transformation. The Gospel issues a warning, too: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come." That also calls us to repentance and reform of our lives.

These texts could serve well for an Advent penance service, too, so planners might keep them in mind. There may seem to be some contradiction between these texts and the idea that Advent is a joyful season of anticipation. The key is to recognize that God's mercy is a reason for joy and that we cannot rejoice in God's love if we are living in a way that keeps us distant from God. Repentance leads to forgiveness which leads to transformation and joy. Preachers and planners should keep that perspective in mind when preparing homilies and prayer texts and choosing music for this season.

Note: We switch today to Cycle B in the Lectionary and Year II for daily readings.

Prayers: 1st Sunday of Advent

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

In the midst of pre-holiday hyperactivity, we are offered this quiet season of reflection on Christ's coming among us, especially in unexpected moments. As with our ancestors in faith, his final return is unknown to us, so we probably don't think about it very much. But how aware are we of his presence to us now? Have we thought about what our response might be however or whenever he makes himself known to us? Advent is our time to do this.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you told your disciples to be alert: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you warned us that your coming will be unannounced: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be ever watchful for you: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray to live this holy season in quiet anticipation of Christ's coming among us.

Minister For the church, that we may be open to Christ's ongoing presence among us...we pray in hope and anticipation.

- For those long waiting for peace, justice and healing... we pray in hope and anticipation.
- For those unable to focus on the deeper meaning of this season... we pray in hope and anticipation.
- For the gift of quiet reflection in the midst of constant distractions and for the desire to enter into this pre-holiday season in new and different ways...we pray in hope and anticipation.
- For those whose view of the future is dark, fearful or discouraging... we pray in hope and anticipation.
- For the many needs of this community and those we care for... we pray in hope and anticipation.

Presider God of patience, this is a season of impatience. We wait for what is yet to come, and we struggle with pre-holiday demands that drain our time and energy. Give us alert, yet peaceful and patient hearts that focus on your deep presence among us and all the ways you make yourself known to us. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus, whose coming we yearn for. Amen.

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