

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

“ADVENT”

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Happy New Year!

These may seem like strange words since we just had Thanksgiving. If you're like me Thanksgiving is still with you, if you know what I mean. Actually, this year I finally realized why turkeys say 'gobble gobble.' It's because that's what we do at thanksgiving. We gobble gobble, and we gain 5 lbs. It's like some sort of subversive vindication for turkeys. I might be taking the joke too far, but I can imagine the turkey saying, "I know you're going to eat me, but first, I'm going to comment on your weight. 'Gobble Gobble!'"

O well... Happy New Year! It is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the beginning, the dawning of the new church year. It is a season of 4 Sundays leading up to Christmas. And it is a time to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

When I was a boy this always confused me. Jesus already came. Why is everyone in my church preparing for him? He already came. That's the whole point of Christmas. He came. Why do we need to prepare for him? Wasn't that John the Baptist's job? What I didn't know as a boy is what our scriptures say so boldly this morning: Yes, he already came. But he's coming again.

It's easy to forget we believe that. But we affirm it every Sunday in the Nicene Creed when we say "he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end." So Advent is not simply a time of preparation for Christmas. In other words, the church hasn't

conveniently sanctioned a 4 week period that fits perfectly between Thanksgiving and Christmas which is just the right amount of time to get all our Christmas shopping done, get our cards sent, hang our decorations, throw our parties, etc. If we aren't careful, the world's Great Winter Holiday will make us bonkers. And bonkers is exactly the opposite of the Christian witness this time of year.

No, Advent preparation is something different. Bishop Grein likes to say that Advent is about the whole world standing on its tip toes waiting for God. And to understand just what this means we need to know our history. Specifically, the history of God's saving acts in the world.

You see, the Church is a critical link in the chain of salvation history. You could say we baptized are the embodied continuation of the New Testament. Jesus was here as God's Supreme Self-Revelation, *and* he's coming back one day to establish his kingdom once and for all. But for the meantime, the in-between time, God is using the Church, the Body of Christ to bear witness to his truth and to proclaim his coming again. And so everything we do formally as a people, from sacraments to scriptures, from bishops to creeds, these are all tools established for the embodied bridging of the original historical event of Jesus to the one which is to come. They are tools for keeping the feast.

This is new work. And this new work is accomplished through a new race of people. Christians. A new race. This is a jarring way to

think about ourselves isn't it? I've recently been reading a book by Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury called *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*. Ramsey uses that term 'a new race.' It's useful because it gets our attention. And it's instructive as a metaphor: We might think of ourselves as having received a new common DNA in the pan-humanity of Jesus' blood which we share in the common cup. The blood of Christ. The cup of salvation. Think about it.

The work of this new humanity, the Church, is to carry the torch from past to future by living the fullness of eternity in the present moment. Or as Jesus said today, to keep awake.

As an aside, It's good when you're the preacher and the gospel lesson Jesus says wake up. If I've put you to sleep already, I have it on good authority to say, "Wake up!"

Staying awake is a spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally difficult thing to do. If we have devoted much holy imagination at all to the idea of the blessed peaceable kingdom which will have no end, then each of us is sure to eventually become discouraged at its timing.

Just reading the newspaper is saddening. The world is a scary place right now. Famines in Africa; Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; The threat of a nuclear Iran; Financial Instability in Europe; Political turmoil in Lybia; Syria; Egypt; The failure of the so-called super committee; Climbing Jobless Rates; Human Trafficking run amok; People spraying pepper spray at Walmart at 4am on Black Friday. I could go on.

There is only one possible response to these things. It is that prayer of the prophet: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." We need your help. Come down. This prayer is not at all unlike THE Prayer, which says "thy kingdom come." Or our adopted parish mantra "Maranatha" which means "Come Lord Jesus." You don't have to be a theologian who speaks 14 languages to figure out that this world is in desperate need.

I've often heard it said that doing the same thing and expecting a different result is the

definition of insanity. If that's true then the world is insane. We trade in the currency of greed and fear and power and revenge. And it gets us in trouble every time.

The world needs something different to guide us. Something true. Something hard but worth the effort. We need a savior. And not just a savior to remedy all that we see in the news. First and foremost, we need a savior to heal wounds in lives of individuals. To heal these wounds is to prevent maladaptive lives of fear, jealousy, and revenge. We need a savior to heal us from our fears. To prevent us from living so subhumanly.

The path of triumph is a spiritual path which leads to a new way of being human in the power of God. Jesus walked that path. And he summons each of us to walk it too. We are summoned to a conversion of heart and life which bears witness to the truth of God in Jesus Christ. And when we embark on the journey of conversion with the intention of being transformed in Christ, something incredible happens to us. Something the world needs desperately: Our fears turn to love, our desire for revenge turns to forgiveness, our egocentrism turns to compassion, and our greed turns to generosity. This is the way of Jesus. This is the way God is healing and saving the world. One person at a time.

Advent is here. What are the fears that cripple you and keep you from being fully human? Prepare ye the way of the Lord. And keep awake.

For you do not know when the time will come.

Amen.