

Advent I Year B 2014

Today we begin a new year in the church; we stop reading Matthew and we start reading from Mark... a new liturgical year... Today is the first Sunday in Advent. The hangings have been changed... the service music and hymns are different... a decidedly different mood... We begin again to tell the story... the story of the world's redemption... a story of the mysterious relationship between the dark with the light... we begin again the cycle of remembering who we are as humans in the presence of God... Liturgy at its heart is the art of remembering... reminding ourselves of why we are here on this earth... reminding ourselves why we get up in the morning... reminding ourselves of the way of things, and celebrating such a memory... celebrating the human narrative, the narrative of our true nature handed down to us from generation to generation... celebrating the human narrative, our God-likeness, as if it were true.

Back in the day, in ancient religious rites, the people of faith celebrated their relationship to God in accordance with the seasons, recognizing the cycle of seasons to be the rhythm of existence... the dark and the light... the land fallow and fertile... these rites reminded our ancestors of what they already knew: that this earthly life was a dance between dark and light, death and renewal... change and transformation...of restoration. These rites were a reminder that one had reason to hope, that as death surely came in all its myriad forms, surely life would follow as it always had... these liturgies merely bore witness to the signs all around them in nature... the earth, its flora and fauna, dying and then being reborn.... Their hymns, their prayers, their praise was to a God who, despite the human folly attributed to, or projected upon her or him... was a God who sustained them year after year after year.... The point I want to make is that liturgy is a means to keep mindful... open to the world as it really is, the dark and the light... to keep open to the signs all around us, and they are there for the seeing...to be in touch with, communion with, reality apart from the illusions that bombard us from within and without...to be attuned to the signs that bear witness to the meaning of life...In short, to be attuned to why we are here.

And now, in the present day, despite being so displaced from nature in our post modern world, we, as people of faith begin again our cycle of remembering the God who sustains us... and we remember that at the heart of the matter is change... the mutability of life.... The creation still in its improbable becoming; and we remember our contingency to this drama, this trauma of change.... And speculating as to the question of what it is for

which we can hope. That is much of the enterprise of faith: Speculating as to what it is for which we can hope.

So, we begin in Advent, the season of expectation, of hope, pregnancy the high metaphor... we begin in the darkest time of the year; waiting for the light. Advent, as you know, means coming... and my question to you this morning, perhaps rhetorical, is the coming of what? As modern Christians it is a question worth asking... and it is not enough to say simply, "the Christ child." Our post-Enlightenment, consumerist culture has robbed that metaphor of its meaning... reduced it to a sentimental platitude... consigned it to garish display at shopping malls... in our world the Christ child has lost its symbolic resonance, its mythic import rendering hope and expectation empty and hollow... empty and hollow in a darkening and seemingly empty world... It is no wonder that depression and addiction is epidemic in our culture.

In our readings from both Isaiah and Mark the theme is expectation, expectation embedded deeply in our DNA, and this expectation is no sentimental matter; this expectation is one of change and transformation, of renewal and restoration, despite our resistance to change... that's a good word, restoration: the return of things to what they are meant to be.... This expectation, at least according to scripture, is an expectation of revolution, of the decisive reordering of the world, no less... a change in the status quo, a change in the warp and woof of the system... It is the expectation of the realization of God's vision of the world as attested to by the ancient sages and scribes... and we are told in both Isaiah and Mark to look for the signs of this reordering... to pay honest attention to what is happening in the world... and what God's vision has to say about it... Both Isaiah and Mark speak of an advent, a coming of a new world order.... An order in which captives are set free, in which healing can take root and place... in which the world's wealth and abundance are shared by all, an order in which violence is ended... an order in which justice prevails.... This anticipated birth is the birth of justice, that great human ideal, that great passion in God's heart... This child that comes is the incarnation of justice, the incarnation of compassion and mercy, and hospitality and welcome and the embrace of neighbor and stranger as brother, as sister... It is up to us, brothers and sisters, to resurrect the metaphor of the Christ child as the beginning of God's reign in earth which is no reign at all but enlightened collaboration among the human community entire. It is up to us to make it real and alive in our world.

We dare not speak of Jesus' coming unless we are willing to embrace the vision of justice he embodied... a vision of a world governed by love

and dignity and empowered agency for every living soul. His life's work and teaching are about living into our second lives, our baptismal lives... that is, lives lived for the good of the other, plain and simple. If that is not what is to come, then the Christ child becomes a plastic decoration on a bed of straw bought at Lowe's.

Why do we come here to this place on the corner of Ann and Government Streets? We come to remember what it is that God promises... and we come to internalize that vision... we come to learn how to pay attention... we come to practice mindfulness so we may be able to read the signs of God's advances in earth, and what powers and principalities stand against such advances... We come to learn the code as it were... to see more clearly, ironically, through mystery and beauty the reality that love is the only thing that matters... the only thing that will save us... All else is sentiment and vanity. This coming is about our coming to the world no less than the Christ. We, the birth of change like our brother, Jesus of Nazareth.

In our lives of faith we are called to the repentance from sin (of which we will read next week)... always repentance... not just in this season, nor just in Lent... But by repentance from sin I don't mean that we just stop doing the little things that we do... I mean we are called to stand against sin that finds itself into the structures of our world, in the structure of the status quo... I mean we are to stand for a revolutionary change so that the world order is rendered gracious and empowering and dignifying and non-violent... For example, as Christians we should be in the streets over the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri. What kind of world is it that a person can kill a child and get away with it? Sorry, there are not two sides to this story... This story is a sign of Sin. What kind of world is it that the prison population in this country is the largest in the world per capita, with the vast majority of the prison population being people of color... a sign of Sin... Read the signs! Sin is that the rules are made to suit the powerful, while dis-enfranchising the powerless... that is what the gospel writers mean by sin... evil that works its way into the social, economic and political system, often unnoticed, often hidden, often under the guise of good intention... Sin attaches to power and then wreaks all manner of havoc, degrading and violent and hateful. And its ally is not so much hateful passion as it is indifference.

The advent of God's reign, this coming of which the prophets speak, is the coming of the changing of the rules... A coming change that will dis-empower the unjust, and grant dignity and well being for all. That is the message of the Christ. That is what we are taught to expect. That is what this birth for which we wait implies; that is what we are taught to enact in our

world. We are told to keep awake; to be mindful. That means that we are to prepare the way for the changing of the rules; for the revolution of love. This promised child will shake heaven and earth. This coming will be traumatic. It will require great courage and honesty and sacrifice. But y'all, it will bring joy that will burn like fire... fire that will consume hatred and shame and violence and fear, and it will bring new life; life in its fullness that comes again as it always has and always will, the sacred rhythm of restoration; the rebirth of the Good... We wait for our true humanity... It is surely coming... e'en so, may it quickly come.