

First Sunday in Advent

November 30, 2008

Lessons: Psalm 80:1-7,16-18; Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

## IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

As you probably guessed as we lit our Advent Wreath a few moments ago, today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new year in the church calendar. Advent is a very unique and important season of the church year. Describing Advent last year, Fr. Bob said:

*“...we find ourselves, yet once again, at the beginning of a new liturgical season, the beginning of a new liturgical year and what could and should be a new beginning for each of us. Advent is the time in which we prepare for the two-fold coming of Jesus. We prepare for the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, that event in which God breaks into a specific time and in a specific place for the purpose of bringing salvation to all human kind. And we also prepare for the final Advent of Christ in His Second Coming and establishment of His Kingdom...The richness of this season is its special combination of celebration, anticipation, repentance, and joyful preparation.”*

Advent is an important time in our spiritual journey. It is a time where we each intensify our waiting and watching for Jesus' presence in our lives. But do you ever wonder what Jesus' presence might look like? If you were really looking for Jesus, where might you look?

Last week, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gave some pretty clear suggestions that we might use. First he gave some directions on what we are expected to do. Jesus said we are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those in prison. That is what we are expected to do. But do you remember what Jesus said you would be doing if you did those things? He said: *“...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me...you did it to me.”*

So Advent, a time of anticipation, of watching, of waiting, is an important time in our spiritual journey. But how will we approach it? How will each of us approach the next four weeks? Shall we just acknowledge that this is another season in the church year, and that we will probably have some exercises that we are supposed to do? Sort of a “ho hum, I guess I had better get on with it” approach. Or do you think that there just might be another, more exiting way to enter Advent. A way that would make our lives more fun, more interesting and much more exciting? Listen to these words from theologian and Bible translator, J. B. Phillips as he describes the new church right after Jesus had risen,

spent time with his disciples and then ascended. And as you listen to these words, put yourself in this picture, and think how these words apply to our world. Phillips wrote:

*“The surrounding world was indeed grey, sometimes black with corruption and all kinds of evil, but in the young Church there was ‘joy’ and indomitable hope...Nothing could quench this hope...The brave, new fellowship of believers in Christ was a light and a flame in the darkness...It was a fellowship of hope...Phillips continues:*

*“It is well worth our while to study the leading characteristics of New Testament Christians. These men and women, when all is said and done, were as human as we are. God cannot conceivably have changed in his nature or purpose over the centuries. (What) we may find, (however) as we compare the life-attitude of New Testament Christians with our own, (is) that a subtle...change has come over us in the intervening centuries. We may find that our timidity and rigidity, our prejudices and preconceived ideas, are most effectively blocking the purpose of God.”* Then Phillips concludes: *“We must take the risk of being wide open on the God-ward side”*.

What would you think, if for the next four weeks, this Season of Advent, we thought of ourselves as first century Christians? What would you think, if every day we got up and lived with the excitement and energy of those early Christians who had lived with and experienced Jesus and his power? What if we kept alert and awake, and waited and watched, with energy and excitement? What would this Advent, this next four weeks, be like if we did that? What would that be like?

And what do you think would happen, if each of us, with energy and excitement, really went looking for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, those needing clothes, the sick and those in prison. What would happen is we, as a church and as individuals who are seeking to be “Instruments of Peace” really looked for hatred, injury, discord, doubt, despair, darkness and sadness. And when we found these things, we could take at least one action that would bring Christ’s love to the world. What would happen, if for the next four weeks, we got excited and really did what we know we are called to do? What kind of a difference do you think it would make?

Let me share a story that I have received and read at least four times, and each time it has touched me. The story goes:

*“One day, when I was a freshman in high school, I saw a kid from my class who was walking home from school. His name was Kyle. It looked like he was carrying all of his books. I thought to myself, ‘Why would anyone bring home all his books on a Friday. He must really be a nerd.’ I had quite a weekend planned (parties and a football game with my friends tomorrow afternoon), so I shrugged my shoulders and went on.*

*“As I was walking, I saw a bunch of kids running toward him. They ran at him, knocking all his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt. His glasses went flying, and I saw them land in the grass about ten feet from him. He*

*looked up and I saw this terrible sadness in his eyes. My heart went out to him. So, I jogged over to him as he crawled around looking for his glasses, and I saw a tear in his eye. As I handed him his glasses, I said, 'Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives.'*

*"He looked at me and said, 'Hey thanks!' There was a big smile on his face. It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude. I helped him pick up his books, and asked him where he lived. As it turned out, he lived near me, so I asked him why I had never seen him before. He said he had gone to private school before now. I would have never hung out with a private school kid before.*

*"We talked all the way home, and I carried some of his books. He turned out to be a pretty cool kid. I asked him if he wanted to play a little football with my friends. He said yes. We hung out all weekend and the more I got to know Kyle, the more I liked him, and my friends thought the same of him.*

*"Monday morning came, and there was Kyle with the huge stack of books again. I stopped him and said, 'Boy, you are gonna really build some serious muscles with this pile of books everyday!' He just laughed and handed me half the books. Over the next four years, Kyle and I became best friends. When we were seniors we began to think about college. Kyle decided on Georgetown and I was going to Duke. I knew that we would always be friends, that the miles would never be a problem. He was going to be a doctor and I was going for business on a football scholarship.*

*"Kyle was valedictorian of our class. I teased him all the time about being a nerd. He had to prepare a speech for graduation. I was so glad it wasn't me having to get up there and speak. Graduation day, I saw Kyle. He looked great. He was one of those guys that really found himself during high school. He filled out and actually looked good in glasses. He had more dates than I had and all the girls loved him. Boy, sometimes I was jealous!*

*"Today was one of those days. I could see that he was nervous about his speech. So, I smacked him on the back and said, 'Hey, big guy, you'll be great!' He looked at me with one of those looks (the really grateful one) and smiled. 'Thanks,' he said.*

*"As he started his speech, he cleared his throat, and began 'Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years. Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach...but mostly your friends... I am here to tell all of you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell you a story.'*

*"I just looked at my friend with disbelief as he told the story of the first day we met. He had planned to kill himself over the weekend. He talked of how he had cleaned out his locker so his Mom wouldn't have to do it later and was carrying his stuff home. He looked hard at me and gave me a little smile. 'Thankfully, I was saved. My friend*

*saved me from doing the unspeakable.' I heard the gasp go through the crowd as this handsome, popular boy told us all about his weakest moment. I saw his Mom and dad looking at me and smiling that same grateful smile. Not until that moment did I realize it's depth.*

*“ Never underestimate the power of your actions.. With one small gesture you can change a person's life. For better or for worse. God puts us all in each other's lives to impact one another in some way. Look for God in others.”*

Last week Bishop O'Neill reminded us that when life comes to an end, the question will not be so much as to whether we worked enough or acquired enough, but did we love enough. Did we hold ourselves safely together, or did we, with open arms, give ourselves and our love away.

This year, let's see if we can enter the Season of Advent with the enthusiasm of the first century Christians. Let's see if we can approach each day and each experience with hope and joy and the spirit of excitement. This Advent, let's be alert and look for opportunities to share Christ's love with those who need it. And with the energy of the early church, let's continue to be Instruments of Peace. During these next four weeks, let's really see if we can make a difference in someone's life.

AMEN