

A sermon preached on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2023,  
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

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

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Have you noticed that the Advent Season is often overshadowed and squeezed out of our attention by the focus on Christmas?

It is easy to understand why we lose our focus on the Advent. It is the shortest season of the Church Year including only the 4 Sundays before Christmas. This year, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent is Christmas Eve, so we'll only be celebrating 3 Sundays in Advent. If we are not attentive, we will miss out on the gift of Advent.

Yet, as followers of Jesus, we really want to use the Advent season to keep our focus on preparing for the awesome gift of Christ's birth. How do we do that?

It helps to be aware that Advent holds in creative tension the two themes of darkness and light. We lament the darkness and brokenness of the world and our lives. We see and feel the December days getting darker and shorter. We see the darkness of the world as we weep over the relentless killings in Israel and Palestine, in Russia and Ukraine, in our own country, around the world. We weep over the injustices in the world and in our nation. We weep over the lack of respect for every person, all of us created in the image of God. We weep over the plight of people without housing or enough to eat and those who suffer from diseases and lack of health insurance. We as a human race are so far from the life of Love Christ created us to live. We weep and lament at all that is not right in the world.

And we recognize and weep at the little ways you and I contribute to the darkness, through our thoughts, words and actions. While the Light of Christ lives within us, we are all still works in progress. We are still beginners in learning how to live the way of Love for God and all neighbors.

So with today's Psalm we prayed three times: "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." We long for God's light to come into the darkness, to restore us and the whole creation into loving harmony with God's will and purpose for us as individuals and as a human race.

The second theme, held in creative tension with lamenting the darkness, is embracing the great joy of knowing that Christ has already come and will keep coming into the world to bring the Light of God's healing Presence into the darkness and brokenness of this world. Advent literally means, Coming. So, we rejoice in what the Advent Scriptures tell us about the 3 comings of Christ to planet earth.

First, we rejoice that the great Creator of the Universe took the loving initiative to come and live among us in great humility, as a vulnerable baby, born of Mary in Bethlehem, in the West Bank of Palestine. In Christ, God's creative Light entered the darkness of the world, to show us God's way of love in the midst of the continuing injustice, violence and the brokenness of people, institutions, systems and nations. The remembrance of Christ's first coming gives us joy and hope as again this year, we wait in the darkness to celebrate Christ's birth among us on Christmas Eve.

Today's gospel focuses our attention on the Second coming of Christ at the end of time to put right all that is not right in the world. Over the last three Sundays the Scriptures have pointed us to this future, culminating coming of Christ to judge the living and the dead. Some of these readings about God's final judgement may have felt uncomfortable to you because you fear that God might not love you, forgive you and welcome you and others into God's Presence. Yet down through the centuries, as people have come to experience Christ in their daily lives, they came to recognize that nothing can separate us from God's forgiving love expressed through Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection. They've come to know that God's mercy and forgiveness is greater than their sins and imperfections. They've learned to ask for and depend on Christ's constant help and guidance and they look forward eagerly to the final coming of Christ with great joy because then, God's justice and mercy, God's love, peace, and truth will finally be fulfilled on earth as in heaven. Then, all will be well.

Jesus uses poetic images to talk about the darkness of suffering that will be experienced before Christ's 2<sup>nd</sup> coming into the world and about the cosmic participation in the darkness: "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give it's light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." The whole cosmos shares in the grief that we human beings have not lived as Christ created us to live in harmony with God, with each other and with God's creation. Then again, into the darkness comes Christ the Light: Then all humanity and the whole creation will all see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from...the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." And he shall reign forever and ever. Alleluia.

The people who heard Jesus say these words, and all of us today ask: when will this happen? How long do we have to wait before Christ comes back and makes all things right in the world?

Jesus gives a clear, yet frustrating answer: We don't know. The Angels don't know. Even Jesus does not know. None of us will know until it happens. The one thing we do know with clarity is: we need to stay alert and prepared for Christ's coming again. Three times Jesus says, keep alert, keep awake.

So, this is our Advent focus and the focus for the rest of our lives. Stay awake! Be prepared to welcome Christ's coming at any moment to bring our personal lives and the human race to a close and make all things right. He will destroy and transform all that is not of God and will save all that is of God so that God's kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as in heaven.

This brings us to the 3<sup>rd</sup> coming of Christ. The way we prepare for Christ's final coming to earth is to welcome Christ's daily coming to be with us and guide us. Christ tells us that he is always with us, at every moment, in our bodies, wherever we are, whatever we are doing. Nothing can separate us from Christ's loving presence. Christ is always loving us, just as we are, wherever we are, with all our gifts and rebellious, distracted imperfections. Christ is eager for us to ask for his help and guidance and to live in harmony with his desires for us. Christ wants us to allow His Spirit to shine in and through us to bring the light of his loving presence into the darkness of our lives and the darkness of the world around us. We stay alert and prepare for Christ's final coming one day at a time, by welcoming at each moment the Christ who is always with us, trusting in his guidance in and through all that comes into our lives.

The question is: given the distractions, the pressures, the demands of December, how practically, can you and I stay awake and keep returning to the meaning and purpose of this Advent Season? How can we keep welcoming Christ's daily coming into our lives, holding in our awareness both the darkness and the light, the penitential laments over all that is not right in the world and our lives... together with the joy and confident hope in the Light of Christ who is already with us and is stronger than the darkness?

Let me suggest two little spiritual practices that might help us keep our Advent focus.

First: Please take out the Scripture insert in the Bulletin. The collect for this first Sunday summarizes the themes of Advent. For centuries, this collect was used as a daily prayer throughout the Advent season. I invite you to take this home and pray this collect every day, perhaps both morning and evening, to help you keep your focus on the deeper meaning of this Advent season.

Second: Please take out the laminated Daily Examen which is also in the bulletin. There are many different versions of the Daily Examen. Ignatius of Loyola taught his Jesuit followers to use this prayer every day. He said, this is the most important prayer to pray if we want to keep growing in our relationship of love with God and our neighbors. For decades this prayer practice has sustained and deepened my life with God, one day at a time.

You can pray it just before you go to bed or in the late afternoon or before or after supper. Sometimes I've used it in the morning, when I'm more alert, to reflect with God over the previous day. Find a time and place that works for you. If you miss a day, just let it go and ask God to help you begin again the next day.

Begin by taking in a few slow, deep breaths and ask God to help you be aware that God is with you, looking at you with eyes of love, just as you are. Ask God to help and guide you as you reflect back over the day.

As you go through the steps of the Examen, be very gentle with yourself. This is not an exercise in self-judgement or self-criticism. This is an invitation to simply be aware of both your life and God's loving presence with you during the day. When you notice situations and relationships when you were out of sync with God, simply be aware and ask God's forgiveness and help. When you sense some wounds or fears or others you might have hurt in your interactions during the day, gently ask for God's healing, forgiveness, peace and guidance. End your brief examen with gratitude, asking for God's loving presence to shine in and through you in the coming day.

You might close with the Lord's Prayer. Or you might close with the Collect for the First Sunday in Advent.

There are additional resources in the back of the church to help you reflect on Scripture and use an Advent wreath to help you welcome the Presence of God into your life each day during this Advent season.

I wonder, how might God be inviting you to welcome Christ's coming into your life and into the darkness of the world in new ways during this Advent season?

Let us pray: let's take a couple of slow deep breaths and be aware that we are in God's presence, feel the loving smile of Jesus looking at you, delighting in you, just as you are...

Next, ask Jesus, what one or two little spiritual practices might He be inviting you to adopt during the next 3 weeks of Advent to help you welcome the light of Christ into the darkness of your life and to shine through you into the darkness of the world?

Let's close by praying together the Collect for the First Sunday of Advent: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.