

**Advent 1, Year C**  
**December 2, 2018**  
**The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew**

The word Advent means coming or arrival, and in the Church we call the season we are in Advent because we are awaiting the arrival of Jesus. Advent is the beginning of a new year in the Church, one built upon the twin practices of expecting and remembering the coming of Jesus. There is always some tension between the Church and our culture in Advent, for our culture prefers to fast forward through times of waiting and embrace celebrating. We see Christmas decorations displayed before Thanksgiving, and Black Friday and Cyber Monday sales starting well before Thanksgiving and extending the week after. We've even moved the Christ Church Christmas Mart to the Saturday before Thanksgiving in recognition of this trend. Preparing for Christmas in our culture is filled with shopping, decorating, cards, parties, family events, Christmas music on the airwaves, and Christmas specials on television. In fact on Friday evening I joined with local friends whose Lifetime made for television movie *A Very Nutty Christmas* aired for the first time, and who bought the 6 foot wooden nutcracker at our Christmas Mart silent auction in celebration of this happy occasion.

Much of our celebrating is in remembrance of the birth of Jesus, who came as God Incarnate that first Christmas and began the slow process of changing the world. In the reading from Jeremiah the prophet declares, **“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel, and the house of Judah.”** Christians read this text in part as a foretelling of the arrival of the newborn Jesus, the one who is a **“righteous Branch”** from the lineage of the great King David, and whose kingdom shall last forever. It is right that we remember and rejoice in the holy day that forever changed the world, when God came among us in the birth of Jesus.

What Advent offers us is an opportunity to prepare on a much deeper level for the coming of God. Advent prepares us to better understand who Jesus is; to remember with awe the choice of God to be embodied as one of us; and to expect that the same Jesus who lived, died, and rose again will return to unite us with God. So, as we celebrate the love of God shown in Jesus with family and friends, we are also preparing for the Risen Christ to return. That is why many Advent readings focus on the Second Coming of Jesus, which creates dissonance with our focus on celebrating the birth of baby Jesus. We need to expand our awareness of the coming of Jesus by looking at our lives and

the space between who we are and who God calls us to be, so that when the Resurrected Jesus returns we can greet him with joy.

As we grow in our capacity to trust God we learn to let go of our attachment to the way things are— no matter how lovely or comfortable or well established they might be. Only by trusting in God, which is what it means to have faith, can we be people who respond to change with hope and courage rather than fear. In his Gospel Luke uses apocalyptic imagery to call us to trust in God, even when everything around us may be changing dramatically, saying: **“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”** Apocalyptic literature in the Bible emphasizes that even when the world as we know it is in the midst of radical change, there is a foundational reality in our relationship with God that will never change. Hence Jesus assures us, **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”**

There is a reason that ‘Do not fear’ or ‘Do not be afraid’ are the most frequently spoken commands or assurances in the Bible. It is because fear is an understandable human reaction to change, especially dramatic or ongoing change. Apocalyptic literature is writing that confronts us with abrupt, dramatic, often cataclysmic change so that we

can address fear in the context of our faith. It gives us an opportunity to talk about that which we most fear, so that we can both acknowledge and move beyond the fear. Episcopal priest Richard Helmer of California shared this insight: **“The true apocalyptic call—that which reveals what is truly divine—is to learn to live faithfully with impermanence and vulnerability.”**

The dissonance between our cultural preparation for and celebration of Christmas and the Church’s observance of Advent is one of depth. On one level, it is right and good to embrace the joy and love of the Christmas season, to spend time with family and friends, to remember to give to those who are in need, to look for Christ in the faces of those who are both dear to us and very different from us. On another level we realize that even as we come again to yet another Christmas, beneath all the festive cultural traditions we need to acknowledge our impermanence and vulnerability. Some people do not need to be reminded of these facts, as their lives make them keenly aware of this reality. Some of us may be blessed with lives that allow us to focus on the good, and therefore choose not to explore the invitation to deeper relationship with God and each other. Yet God calls us to a more profound relationship, one in which we may choose to say yes, as

surely as Mary and Joseph said yes, to a relationship with Jesus that will change everything. The Bible tells us again and again that our choice to say yes to God does not provide us with a smooth path, an easy life, or freedom from fear or want. Instead what God gives us is God's very self, first in Jesus and also in the Holy Spirit, along with a whole community of other Christians, so that we can have the courage, companionship, and love we need to follow faithfully along the way. This way, when we inevitably face that which causes us to fear, we know it is not the end, but only a change. For, as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said,

**Death does not have the last word.  
Hatred does not have the last word.  
Violence does not have the last word.  
Bigotry does not have the last word.  
Sin, evil do not have the last word.  
The last word is God, and God is love.**

Amen