

Sermon for 27 November 2011
1 Advent, Year B

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

One of the oddest things about coming back to Arkansas after seven years in the northeast is re-acclimating to being in the religious minority. Now, I for one believe that the divisions we draw between different flavors of Christianity can be overdrawn, often with a bit of chauvinism or snobbishness on our part, but it is nonetheless weird to be back in a place where Episcopalians and Roman Catholics and Presbyterians and the like (the mainline groups) are rather smaller than fundamentalist and charismatic types of Christianity.

This being the context in which I find myself, the following, which has always been a more academic point, takes on new resonance: I believe that we mainline Christians have ceded too much of what is essentially Christian belief and action for

fear of being identified with that other group. Evangelism is one of those things we've ceded. We shy away from the very term "evangelical" because it's come to mean something different from what it really does. It's come to mean people who hold a very specific set of beliefs and a distinct religious culture within the American religious milieu, instead of simply people who love the Gospel and want to share it with others. The latter is all the word really means.

Anyway, another of those issues we tend to shy away from in so-called mainline Christianity is Jesus' second coming and the advent of the Kingdom of God. This is precisely what Advent is about (it's not just about waiting to put the bambino into the crèche), but, due to mainline discomfort with the idea, we've been putting conditions on the meaning of the doctrine ever since the nineteenth century. Back then, liberal protestants started speaking in terms of gradually building the Kingdom

of God themselves rather than expecting Jesus to actually, literally come back and establish it himself. The view has even gained some traction in American Catholicism with a very popular, but theologically unfortunate hymn whose refrain proclaims "Let us build the city of God." Little is said in the hymn about Jesus' role in the matter. Such an approach is full of hubris. It suggests that we're more powerful than God, or at least that God chooses not to act in history. Smart people like Karl Barth, have pointed out the error, but still many hold the view.

Conversely, we find people who espouse the view that we've really no part in God's work. The claim is that being responsible stewards of creation, that working to bring about a better state of affairs for the poor and the oppressed is really to no avail, because Jesus is going to come back and fix everything anyway. The only thing we should be concerned with, the argument goes, is saving souls,

so that our fellows can enjoy the Kingdom when it *does* come.

Like so many other theological issues, the truth here may be found in the middle way, the *via media* that my own Anglican tradition talks about so much but seems to overlook so often. The historical Christian view, which we hear in the Gospel appointed for this week, is that Jesus really will come again, there really will be a second advent, more grand and glorious even than Christ's first Advent on the first Christmas, and, what's more, we've got got something to do about it.

For one, we watch and wait. "Watch therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning -- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch." This is rare for me, but I actually prefer the newer translation of this passage, which is less accurate, but somehow more

resonant. Instead of "watch," Jesus says "Keep awake".

We not only watch, but we pray. We pray ceaselessly for the establishment of God's reign. "Thy Kingdom come," we say every week in church, and many of us every day, but we probably don't fathom the full extent of the words when we utter them. They've become rote. If we did indeed pay attention, we'd recognize how potentially frightening those three words are. Jesus said in today's Gospel:

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

Scary stuff, huh? Actually, our Gospel reading this morning picked up right after the really nasty bits; I love nasty bits, so here they are:

But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the

reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything away; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be.

It's no wonder we tend to shy away from this theme in Scripture, why we replace the old themes of Advent—death and judgment and heaven and hell—with sentimentality. I think we've made a big mistake in that regard.

The response that the kingdom of God will elicit when it does ultimately come, doesn't sound too comforting; but two-thousand years have passed since Jesus said these words, which has tended to take away the sense of urgency. But, guess what, we don't need to be frightened or, worse, to cling to strange theories and time-tables regarding Christ's

return, but we should, nonetheless, *urgently* pray that God's will might be done, that his Kingdom might come and his reign might begin on earth as it is already in heaven.

And prayer is not the only duty to which we are bound in light of our expectation of Christ's return. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth with the following words of encouragement:

I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge -- even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you -- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul doesn't say, go out while you've still got time and rack up souls for Christ, like notches on a belt. God saves souls, we can only share our experience of his love for us with others. What Paul does say is "[be] not lacking in any spiritual gift" and "[with God's sustenance be] guiltless in

the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." God is the agent, of course, the one giving the gifts and sustaining us in holiness, but it is ours to open ourselves up to that. It is up to us to permit God in to make us love our neighbors and to make us more holy, more saintly, in preparation for eternity.

You've all seen the bumper sticker: "Jesus is coming, look busy". In fact, what it should say is "Jesus is coming, let God get busy." Let God get busy making each of us a temple of his presence, a mansion made ready for Christ when he shall come again. Let God get busy, his power working in us infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Let God get busy, restoring whatever is lacking in our faith. This is what Advent is about. Jesus *is* coming again; let God get busy, making us ready to receive him when he does.

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Amen.