

Hope, Actually

The Rev. Ryan Wiksell



December 1, 2024

The First Sunday of Advent

St. Michael's Episcopal Church
Independence, MO

May I speak with the Breath of God, from the Word of God, in the Name of God. Amen.

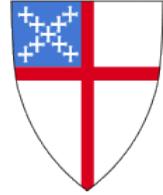
- Welcome to Advent, everyone.
 - The first Sunday of Advent is one of my favorite days of the year, for a few reasons.
 - One: I get a little tired of our Sundays being labeled 15 Pentecost and 28 Pentecost and 327 Pentecost. As exciting as Ordinary Time can be at first, after awhile it gets old.
 - Two: I mark the first Sunday of Advent as the beginning of my Episcopal journey.
 - It was on this day in 2013 that our best friends Lisa and Mircea invited us to the baptism of their first-born, at Trinity Church in Lawrence.
 - The second Sunday, we visited Christ Church in our home town of Springfield for the first time, and the rest is history.
 - But the third reason is that it's an opportunity to rant a little about the way our culture always screws up December.
- As we're all painfully aware, the Christmas holiday has been re-appropriated as a commercial bonanza.
 - Part of this, of course, has been to hyper-extend the Christmas shopping season backwards into November as far as possible.
 - This is not just anecdotal: in 1939 President Roosevelt actually moved the date of Thanksgiving one week earlier in response to an explicit request from the National Dry Goods Association to lengthen the Christmas shopping season.
 - With that, not only was the whole month of December contingent upon Christmas, but the holiday of Thanksgiving was sucked into its orbit as well.
- There may be no more blatant symbol of this misappropriation than the "Advent Calendar"
 - Granted, I'm not anti-fun. There's nothing wrong with little gifts each day leading up to Christmas.

- But why call it an “Advent Calendar?” I mean, every Advent Calendar, every year, goes from December 1 to December 24.
- And that’s not how Advent works...
- Except... except this year that actually is how it works. Sorry.
- I’ll save this complaint for next year. Have fun with your Advent Calendars. For now...
- I hope I’m not the only one put off by the commercialization of December.
 - Any Christian who cares about the true “reason for the season” should be a little annoyed by all this.
 - Fortunately, some of us are part of a tradition that has a ready-made spiritual escape from the madness: we have the ancient liturgies and practices of the season of Advent.
 - But even those of us who have observed this season our whole lives can find it a bit elusive.
 - Advent, as a noun, means “an arrival.” But I think much of the culture around us wants us to believe its simply a more spiritual word for “the Christmas season”, or the 24 days preceding the Feast of the Nativity. But the Lectionary readings don’t support this idea at all.
- Yes, Advent is a time of preparation.
 - But it is most certainly not "pre-Christmas". It is not a time to prepare for the baby Jesus.
 - It is a time to prepare for the person of Christ. For our coming redemption. For justice and righteousness.
 - This is why the readings, and the preparatory prophecies, don't point us to a simple birth. They point us to Christ, and his ultimate mission.
 - If you look closely you’ll see it: they really seem to be pointing us right past his first coming, to his ultimate coming.
 - Maybe that’s because we really don’t need an entire month to focus on the Nativity event. The twelve days of Christmas will suffice for that.

- Our time, during these four weeks, is better spent looking at the promise of a Messiah, and what that Messiah and his Kingdom means for us, and for the world.
- That God is doing a new thing. And in our redemption we can experience a new beginning.
- Advent is the beginning of something new.
 - It is not a time to wait for a beginning. It is not a preparation for a new day to arrive. It is the arrival of a new day.
 - And, just as in the Jewish practice, that new day begins in darkness. “And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day” (in this case, the first day of the Christian Calendar).
 - And so our liturgical “new year” begins, not with the flash of fireworks, or a brilliantly lit stainless steel ball descending from above, but with a lone candle in the darkness.
 - A symbol of Hope.
- Just as Advent is not contingent upon Christmas, Hope is not contingent upon circumstance.
 - Hope is not "about" something else. It is its own thing.
 - Hope is a reality all its own, and it has a power all its own.
 - When you hold onto hope, your reality changes.
 - It starts by changing your heart and mind, then it changes the hearts and minds of others, and little by little it changes everything around you.
 - It changes the air you breathe.
 - Hope brings healing, quite literally.
 - Hope reconciles enemies.
 - Hope generates miracles.
- Because Hope is not contingent upon circumstance, it will appear foolish to others.
 - It will appear foolish to those who don’t hear the promise that “In those days and at that time [God] will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”
 - But you hear it.

- They don't hear the promise that God will make you "increase and abound in love for one another and for all," and "strengthen your heart in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."
- But you hear it.
- They don't hear the promise that "the Son of Man is coming in a cloud with power and great glory, and your redemption is drawing near."
- But you hear it. You heard it today. We, in this room, we all heard it.
- And when we hope against all hope, we in this room can back each other up, because we have heard the music together.
- If you can explain your hope in sensible terms, it's just optimism. Just wishful thinking.
 - But if our Hope is rooted in the promise of God for the healing of the world, then our Hope actually has the power to bring that healing to pass.
 - That, my brothers and sisters, is Advent Hope. A Hope that is not the byproduct of another reality, but is in fact the engine of its own reality.
 - And that reality, as we've read today, is justice.
 - It is righteousness.
 - It is holiness.
 - And above all, that reality is Love.
- This Advent, may we increase and abound in love, for one another, and for all.
- Amen.

The Lessons appointed for use on the
First Sunday of Advent



Year C
RCL

Jeremiah 33:14-16
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36
Psalm 25:1-9

The Collect

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.*

Old Testament

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

The Psalm

Psalm 25:1-9

Ad te, Domine, levavi

- 1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you; *
let me not be humiliated,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
- 2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; *
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.
- 3 Show me your ways, O LORD, *
and teach me your paths.
- 4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, *
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.
- 5 Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, *
for they are from everlasting.
- 6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; *
remember me according to your love
and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.
- 7 Gracious and upright is the LORD; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.
- 8 He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.
- 9 All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness *
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

The New Testament

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in

holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

The Gospel

Luke 21:25-36

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."
