

Year A, Advent 1
November 28, 2010
Epiphany, Winchester
The Reverend Roger E. Nelson

Keep awake, therefore for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. . .
Therefore you . . . must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected
hour.

As we begin this season of Advent, once more our attention is focused on the themes of expectation and preparation. While our three scripture readings date from hundreds of years in the past, they continue their central function of having us face the future. We know where we have come from. We have some sense of where we are. But where are we going? What is the goal of creation? Is there a purpose to what has been and to what is now? It is questions such as these that Advent brings to the forefront of our imagination and vision.

We generally think of Advent as a period of preparation for Christmas, the unique event of the birth of the Son of God. Yet if you read the scriptures for this opening Sabbath of Advent carefully, you will discern that they are not specifically about the Christmas event at all; rather they look beyond the Incarnation towards the second coming of the Son of Man, when all of creation is brought to its final fulfillment.

Thus we begin Advent by looking far beyond John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men. For Isaiah it is a time when the nations shall stand before God in judgment and

. . . shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore.

For the Hebrew prophets, such as Isaiah, the time they were envisioning was very much a time of communal, not individual salvation. For them the Messianic age would be a time of reconciliation among all creation: wars shall cease, the rich shall no longer exploit the poor, the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, and justice shall flow down like streams of water upon the earth. It was to be a time of justice and mercy, when all creation would walk humbly before the God of gods and Lord of lords.

This prophetic vision of universal comity has been the inspiration behind many reform movements that have occurred throughout the past five thousand years. For our times, the most obvious example will always be the Civil Rights revolution, when the final public vestiges of 350 years of slavery and discrimination towards black Americans were swept away with a generation. Prophets such as Martin Luther King, Jr. were able to make the vision of God's Kingdom so real that the trappings of segregation crumbled before the power of the commandment to love one another. With what in the annals of history is a mere blinking of the eye, gone were separate schools and drinking fountains

and lunch counters. Voting rolls were opened to all. Discrimination in public facilities was outlawed. Young children today have a difficult time envisioning the society of discrimination in which their grandparents grew up.

If the Hebrew prophets envisioned the end of time in communal terms, Saint Paul conceived the end of time in more personal terms – namely, the individual.

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep . . .
Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light . . . put on the
Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provisions for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

For Paul and the Apostles the seed of the coming of the kingdom of God lay in the conversion of the individual. The message was repentance and reformation of one's own life. Yet this radical change was not able to be done entirely on one's own. It required connection to a community, to the Church, in order to grow and to withstand the assaults of the Devil. And baptism became the sign of both of personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior, and of membership in the community of Jesus' followers. Time and again Paul and the other writers of the New Testament epistles call us to turn from the lusts and desires that corrupt our human nature are preventing us from loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Christian history is full of examples of persons who have radically transformed their lives, thereby moving all of society closer to the kingdom that is to come – Augustine and Francis for two examples. The person who wrote that favorite hymn of so many of you, "Amazing Grace" is another example. John Newton was the captain of an English slave trading vessel, when he was suddenly convicted by his Christian beliefs of the evil of slavery, and became a leader in the English anti-slavery movement. That is the "amazing grace" of which he speaking – the grace that allows us to capture a sense of the vision of God that results in a change in who we are and how we behave.

Thus we, as individuals and as a community of faith, begin then season of Advent with an expectation of a world transformed by God's loving purpose for all creation and with a desire to prepare ourselves by means of repentance and conversion of a life to be a part of God's coming reign over the whole cosmos. We are back where we began this morning: expectation and preparation.

In terms of expectation today's gospel warns us to be aware that any notions we may have about the purpose and future course of creation are naïve and incomplete. Our rational, scientific minds have helped us to understand much of the created order. Maybe they have given us a false idea of how it may end. But we are warned that God can break in at any time: how about 3 o'clock Greenwich mean time tomorrow afternoon? Will you be ready? We should not lose sight of the tentativeness of the world and our lives in this world. So keep those lamps of yours filled with oil, for we do not know when the bridegroom will return.

In terms of preparation do not cease to pray, to read scripture, and to be fed by the sacrament. But those are the basics only. If you are alienated from another human being, then seek reconciliation. If you have sinned, then acknowledge that sin, make appropriate restitution, and receive forgiveness. If you have wandered from the household of faith, then return to a loving parent whose arms are outstretched to receive you back. If you are afraid, then strive to fear not, for he is with you always. If you are lost, then know that he is seeking you, searching the fields and cleaning the house until you are found. If you are dyeing, then remember that you will not die forever, and that God is the God of the dead as well as of the living.

Welcome to Advent. May it be for you, indeed for all of us as individuals as well as a parish, a time of expectation and a time of preparation.