

St. Francis Church

The First Sunday of Advent 2004

Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14 and Matthew 24:36-44

The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the Church's new year. It's a season filled with possibilities, providing each of us with a chance to make a fresh start... We don't begin from scratch, of course. The stuff we were struggling with last week is probably still with us this week, at least in some capacity. But Advent gives us a chance to let go of some of the things that are holding us back from becoming more faithful followers of Jesus Christ and for us to try on some new ways and patterns that may help us to grow into the full stature of Christ. Our attention turns toward the future—and toward the surprising ways that Christ keeps breaking into our lives and into this world to make all things new. But to turn toward the future requires us to let go of whatever in the past is holding us back from abundant life. It also requires of us a willingness to cultivate the spiritual discipline of waiting, and of learning to be patient.

Don't worry: Christmas will come—regardless of whether we accomplish all the things that are on our “to do” lists for this next month. Christ does come into the world, in unexpected ways. But for the baptized community the question is: will we get ourselves to a place where we will be able to see what is happening, where we can hear the songs of the angels joyfully announcing Christ's birth so that we can join in the singing of those songs? If that is our hope, then we may need to journey to new places and into what may be uncharted territory—perhaps literally, and definitely metaphorically. Mary and Joseph had to travel from their home in Galilee to Bethlehem, the city of David, because of that census. John the Baptist went out into the Judean wilderness. The shepherds were out keeping watch of their flocks by night. The magi journeyed from the east, led by a star. If you and I want to move toward Jesus during this Advent season, how will we get ourselves oriented so that we are heading the right way?

Both the prophet Isaiah and today's psalmist point us toward God's call to each of us to be peacemakers, echoing the heart of our mission statement here at St. Francis. “*Lord, make us instruments of your peace...*” They imagine a time when Jerusalem will live up to its name and be a city of “salem”—that is a city of peace. Isaiah sees the dawn of a day when the highest percentage of GNP will not be spent on weapons of mass destruction and the instruments of war, but rather on education, and healthcare, and agriculture. He says it more poetically, but make no mistake that is what the prophet sees: a day when swords are beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks—a day when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4) And so the psalmist invites God's people to pray “for the peace of Jerusalem”—for when there is peace in Jerusalem surely there will be new hope for a tired world. Surely nations will stream toward that reality, and be inspired to risk peace themselves.

If we want to see Jesus, we need to be among those who are working for peace. And like the song says, if we dare to pray for peace on earth, then we must be willing to “let it begin with me.” We can and should think globally and pray globally. But peacemakers always grasp that the real work, the difficult work, begins locally—in the most local way imaginable—in our own souls, at our own dinner tables, in our own communities. We may not be able to bring about global peace on our own: but what can we do to make town meetings a little more civil? Maybe we start there, and trust God and others to join hands with us.

Most of us will not directly influence the peace process in Israel. And yet we can let our voices be heard, speaking out for all of God's children—not only Israelis but Palestinians as well. There can be no peace if one group is simply denied its right to exist, or made invisible. The work that we do as an Episcopal Church, especially each year with our Good Friday offering, is dedicated to the work of reconciliation between Christians and Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land. Closer to home, we can work toward understanding by removing old biases and stereotypes based on fear. Working for peace doesn't imply that we are all the same—or that we can (or should) ignore the very real differences between Christians and Jews and Muslims. (Or for that matter the differences that exist *within* each of those traditions.) It means simply that we are called to find ways to honor those differences rather than killing each other—literally or figuratively. It means that the commandment to not bear false witness against others applies to what we say about Jews and Muslims—and I am saddened that so much of what Christians say about Jews and Muslims comes from a place of ignorance and misunderstanding rather than wisdom and conversation. There is no way for swords to be beaten into plowshares if we refuse to see the image of God in the face of the other.

In his own day, at the height of the crusades, our friend from Assisi traveled into the Arabic world to engage in conversation with Sufi mystics. He was willing travel into a strange and different world because the call he felt to be an instrument of God's peace was that strong.

So I think Advent should be about that kind of risky faith. Advent is about praying for peace on earth and good will toward all but it's also about *working* for peace—at home and abroad.

Advent is about the dawn of a new day. And so Paul tells the Church in Rome—and the church in every generation to “wake up!” He insists that it is not just morning in America, but that the steadfast love of the Lord is new every morning all over God's creation—from north to south and east to west. St. Paul says that it is time to wake from our slumber and get dressed—putting on the armor of light, to live honorably as in the day. And what does that mean? Paul associates reveling, and drunkenness and debauchery and licentiousness and quarrelling and jealousy with the nighttime. But if it really is morning, he says to the Church in Rome and to us—if a new day really is dawning and we really believe that, then it is time for us to put on righteousness and sobriety and reconciliation—it's time for faith, hope, and love.

So, too, St. Matthew and the community for whom he writes looks toward the fulfillment of human history. On this first Sunday of Advent the Church of Jesus Christ is invited not only to “wake up” but then to “keep awake!” To keep our eyes wide open and to stay alert! For what? What are we looking for? And how will we know it when we see it? We are looking for signs of the presence of God—places where God is at work—in our lives and in the world.

But we are also called to look for places that need tending to. Like our patron, we are willing to see in places of hatred the opportunity to sow love and to see in places where there has been injury, the opportunity for pardon. You don't have to look far to find discord. But it takes courage to be an agent of healing and to reconciliation in those places. Are you willing to go there this month?

And there is plenty of doubt all around us...and maybe even a fair amount within us as well. But if we are trying to live the prayer of St. Francis, then what is required of us is to see where there

is faith at work as well. You don't need much—faith even the size of a mustard seed, Jesus says, is enough to move mountains. So where there is doubt, let us sow faith in this Advent season.

More perhaps even than doubt, there is despair and darkness abounding in our world. But we are a people who have walked in darkness—and yet seen a great light. God's people are not called to curse the darkness, but to let our little lights shine for all the world to see—to illumine a path forward. So where there is despair, we point toward hope—not as cockeyed optimists but as holy realists. What can we say, or do, to bring hope to those who live as if yesterday was better than tomorrow can yet be?

And surely there is much sadness in our world, and way too much perhaps to be sad about. There is in this month ahead of us especially far too much pain for so many of our neighbors and for many in our own congregation. Sadness that comes from old wounds and unresolved grief—from divorce and death and financial hardships. Those are all there 365 days a year, to be sure. But there is an intensity to that that often emerges in December—a sadness that somehow we feel we don't “measure up” to the “real” meaning of Christmas and all that. People are expected to be happy in December, yet very often feel incredibly sad.

Yet we are Easter people—and even in Advent we are called to be Easter people. Do we dare to see in the midst of life's disappointments and failures and sadness an opportunity for Christ to bring joy and new life? Do we dare to pray with St. Francis, “where there is sadness, let me sow joy.” We are, after all, a people of great joy—who know what it is to hear angels and archangels singing their joyful chorus: “Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth...” How can we learn to listen for the songs of angels ourselves—and help others to listen—so that when the singing begins again we can join those songs with all the choirs of heaven?

The church's two great guides through Advent are John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of our Lord. In “year A”—which is this year—we also get to look at this story through the eyes of Joseph as well. So that is where we are heading over the course of these next three weeks: with John, Mary, and Joseph to guide us once again toward Bethlehem, so that together we might come and behold him. I invite you to pay attention to their wisdom and insights over these next three weeks—for they have much to teach us as modern people. I invite you to attend the Taize prayer services we offer with the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics in this community—because those moments of silence in the midst of the noise of December are an opportunity to listen together through contemplative prayer. I invite you to come here on Wednesday, December 22 for a parish-wide healing service—where we can offer prayers for spiritual and physical and mental health, for personal healing and for healing in families, in this nation, and in the world. I invite you to be part of the Advent study on Benedictine spirituality, as we explore together ways to find balance in our sometimes very unbalanced lives.

Advent gives us a chance to make a fresh start—to let the breath of God breathe on us again. It gives us a chance to make a pilgrimage together—a journey of the heart—a journey that prepares a way in the wilderness, making straight paths—so that together we can “come and behold Him” a month from now with new eyes.

The Rev. Richard M. Simpson, November 27/28, 2004, in Holden, Massachusetts