

Advent I Year A: Nov. 30 / Dec. 1 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“This season in the life of the Church where hope and anticipation prevail, allows me to do the serious self-reflection necessary to fully embrace the gift of Christ’s Light that is celebrated every 25th of December. You may think it is about gifts, and trees, and glitter, gatherings and parties, when in fact, it is about Love coming to dwell among us... It is about spiritually embracing God’s justice and compassion.”

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Romans 13: 11-14

Matthew 24: 36-44

Psalm 122

A few weeks ago, I returned to a régime of self-care by going for evening walks. On one of my first forays into the village, I noticed that someone had erected their Christmas tree in their apartment. And it was lit. I mumbled to myself that it was a tad early for such a display, but thought nothing more of it. After all, I have gotten use to the twelve weeks before Christmas shopping season that begins sometime in September. However, with each subsequent evening walk I took, more and more neighbors starting following suit to the point that one week before Thanksgiving and the neighborhoods I walked had become festooned in holiday array. Though festive and gay as these accouterments are, I felt sadder that our culture has so appropriated Christmas that it seems the holiday has become a caricature of its spiritual self.

Now some may say that is simply a product of my getting older; maybe I am getting jaded or cynical. I am not yet old enough to be called a curmudgeon, but I am old enough to remember that Christmas is a season in the life of the Church which lasts for twelve days beginning on Christmas day. Not Christmas Eve. Not Thanksgiving Day. Not Halloween. And not Labor Day. Christmas day itself – the first day of twelve. As I enter the Autumn of my life, I have simply become more reflective on the meaning of holidays – or holy days – and take them spiritually in stride.

With the commercialization of Christmas taking precedent over its kerygma, its essential meaning, I have found myself embracing Advent more and more. This season in the life of the Church where hope and anticipation prevail, allows me to do the serious self-reflection necessary to fully embrace the gift of Christ's Light that is celebrated every 25th of December. You may think it is about gifts, and trees, and glitter, gatherings and parties, when in fact, it is about Love coming to dwell among us. To receive that gift requires more than being checked off a list for being naughty or nice. It is about spiritually embracing God's justice and compassion. About making straight a highway in the desert of our lives for God's grace and mercy to dwell among us and within us.

George Frederic Handel has immortalized segments of the Book of Isaiah in his composition The Messiah. Many of us will hear segments from that work throughout the Holiday season. What you will not hear are the words we hear in today's first lesson, where Isaiah, the seemingly least rascally and irritating of the prophets, is imploring the people towards self-reflection that offers an opportunity to turn away from practices that have alienated them from God's path of righteousness and justice. He begins his prognostication with an invitation to consideration of their spiritual and cultural practices that have alienated them from God's graciousness – an invitation to consideration of **our** spiritual and cultural practices that alienate us from God's graciousness. Walk in the light of the Lord; do not forsake God's pathway. Isaiah is imploring the people that religious acculturation, political alliances, and the abuse of wealth as power do not align with God's providence. Depend on your "self" at your own peril. The people of Israel (as are we today) are being offered the opportunity to repent from their self-absorbed ways and turn to God. Not dissimilar to what Paul is also advocating.

The moment for us to wake from sleep is now; [For] Salvation is at hand. Whenever you read Paul, it is always wise to recall that he believed Jesus' return was imminent – that it would happen within his lifetime. The Gosplers, writing a generation or so later, had to wrestle with the reality this did not happen as Paul imagined. But for Paul, being prepared was essential, and doing so meant embracing Jesus as the Christ, and arranging one's life accordingly. Most of the time we live in a cultural fog that obfuscates God's mission in the world. We settle for our

consumerist economy being the dictator of what we value. Thanksgiving is now a Norman Rockwell moment. Christmas has become a Hallmark keepsake. The frivolity that consumerism represents has eclipsed the kerygma of the soteriological narrative that is God's Incarnation. And St. Paul is not having any of it, for the essential message of salvation history is Christ Jesus.

Now is the time. Now is the moment when we have the opportunity to turn from a pathway of consumerist self-indulgence, and embrace the righteousness of our God as enfleshed in Jesus, the Christ. The cruciform theology that is St. Paul's, begins there. Not in some sales flyer or mall advertisement; but with the Incarnation. And to receive that gift, we need to prepare ourselves, to make way for the Light of the World to enter our hearts and transform our lives. Just as Isaiah implored the Israelites, St. Paul implores the people to repent and return to a righteousness that aligns with God's mission of reconciling all things in Christ. Rather than worrying about which Christmas party or social gathering we need to attend, might we be better served if we attend to our spiritual selves and practices that foster wellness for the human family *and respect for creation*. After all, the book of nature expresses God's gracious goodness as much as the book of scripture and we need to honor that. Think about this as you witness the number of evergreen trees that will litter the side of the road on the 26th of December, the second day of Christmas.

"Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." That is Matthew's attempt to address St. Paul's understanding of the *Parousia*. It is Matthew's way of saying Jesus' return (the *Parousia*) is going to happen, we just do not know precisely when that will be. Theologians have wrestled with that expectation ever since, and, because of that, are divided into several theological camps. The one I ascribe to simply argues that we have already enter the eschatological age, which is both now and not yet, where the *Parousia* is manifest in the Eucharistic feast that fashions the Body of Christ in space and time, in the here and now. In other words: the end of time is upon us, yet not fully realized; Jesus' second coming is made present when we gather for the Eucharist, for in our gathering we make Christ known to the world. We do that every time we come forward to receive communion where we receive That which we are thus to become what we are given – behold what you are; become what you receive as St. Augustine put it. Are we prepared to receive **that** gift?

Do not let your senses become dull. Do not allow your hearts to be drawn into frivolous matters. Do not become numb to the injustices that prevail around us. Be attentive. Be awake. Be prepared. That is the heart of Jesus' message as captured in today's passage from Matthew. And the heart of this, the First Sunday in Advent. The time is at hand: prepare the way of the Lord. Amen!!!