

Advent 1 (A)
Nov. 27, 2022
Christ Episcopal Church
Towanda, Pa.
Rev. Betsy W. Sentigar

Our Advent Community of Faith

The order of service in our church involves the looking backward remembering God's acts of salvation over generations and looking forward, anticipating God acting in the world in the here and now as well as future divine vindication.

Advent in our Christian tradition helps us to look at the "in between times.": We reflect on God's promises to the Israel of Immanuel, God with us as human flesh. We also look forward to anticipate Immanuel returning to us as King of Kings and Lord of lords. Victory will put death under his feet. In this season, we look to, and give thanks for God the Christ Child. Jesus warns that the day of judgement as described in Matthew's parable will take the world by surprise.

Two will be in the field, one will be taken and one will be left. This is a particular scary thought. It confronts us with the stark choice which we are asked to take as we approach the feast of Christmas. This Jesus who will proclaim God's kingdom of love and justice- am I with Him or not? Or as my dad would say, "Are you with me or agin me?"

Many of us realize it's a bit of both. We want to be like Jesus, and then again, sometimes we don't. Donald Winicott coined the terms "true self" and "false self". Quite a few writers on spirituality have used these terms as well.

True self is who I really am in God- without pretense or masks- forgiven and loved and called into friendship with Jesus.

False self is the me that projects my own importance and self-sufficiency into the world, pretending I do not need the help of God.

In the field of our lives, both are there. We pray that as we encounter Jesus [Emmanuel - God with us] we want to become more like him. We hope our false self can be gone and our true selves realized. What a relief that would be, resting in the truth that I am a sinner, yes, but forgiven and utterly loved by God.¹

One particular line of thinking sees *judgement day* not at the end of human history, much as we have envisioned it in our literal thinking but at the time of *each individual's death*.

Each of us will stand before God as we take our last breath, giving an account for our life. If we follow what Jesus commands as best we can, as fallible as we are, we are ordering our lives and preparing ourselves in the here and now. This week I talked to a self-proclaimed burned out Christian, or as she called herself in the grocery store called "A recovering Roman Catholic." I was saddened by the thought that perhaps this preacher's fire and brimstone judgement seat was overemphasized leaving God's unconditional love and mercy in the back seat .

I do not experience most Roman Catholic preachers today in this way at all. However, faithful churchgoers of any denomination, including our own, who received continual overemphasis on judgement often fall into a state of perpetual anxiety.²

How does this help us to envision our Advent Community of Faith - lets us visit three areas :
Hope, Memory and Alertness!

- **Advent Community of Hope** - We are called away from historical anxiety . Think about the Serenity Prayer: "We are asked to accept the things we cannot change." Often there are

¹ Pray as You Go- jesuit.org.uk Nov. 27, 2022

² David L Bartlett. *Feasting on the Word*. Advent 1. Kindle edition

things we do not know moving forward, but in God we trust, and we pray without the ability to know or control.

- **Advent Community of Memory** - With confidence we look back into scripture - into old and new testament stories which remind us we can't ignore the action and power of God working in history to see what God has done and giving us confidence in what God will do in God's time.³ It is a good practice to have curiosity and confidence to see how God is working in present history... in the Good News that occurs in the world, fully recognizing that God is in the midst of suffering - not preventing it, but being present to it in the resources of human acts of kindness and compassion. A saying on my desk reminds me: Jesus did not come into the world to prevent suffering, He came to fill it with His Presence. We don't have to look far back in our own church history to see where God was present to observe, bless, and offer hope for the future. I encourage you to ponder this specifically with prayers of remembrance and gratitude.

- **Advent Community of Alertness**

- Our text reminds us to keep awake. Faith, hope and memory draw us toward Christian responsibility and stewardship. Moving forward in the Gospel of Matthew, we will be called to keep awake to the needs of others. Before **what we may envision as Jesus** coming in the clouds, Jesus may appear just around the corner, suddenly like a person or family with food scarcity coming to our Grace Connection ministry , a person suddenly experiencing a life altering event in the ICU, someone coping acute or chronic illness, a grieving friend or relative or someone imprisoned. These are frequent encounters in our lives.

For you see my friends, God's grace is already at work in us. Jesus calls us the readiness which is shaped not by fear of the future, but rather by gratitude for life in the kingdom of Christ that is already offered to us and which we already participate in. Faith and hope are encouraged.

³ *Ibid*

Know that Jesus loves you. Know that he longs for everyone to be saved, for that is why he came. We are not meant to live our lives in a perpetual state of tension. Jesus wants to “keep awake” and also to trust in him. Neither complacency nor anxiety but awake and with him. ⁴

God has begun a good work in us. It is this which brings trust and hope. It is in this that we are transformed more and more into the stature of Christ which seeks to become manifest in our particularity and which seeks to be made manifest in acts of mercy, forgiveness, and loving kindness. I pray that our lives are deepened in relationship with Christ who meets us whichever way we turn, whether toward the past, the present, or the future. ⁵

And may the Sun of Righteousness shine upon each of us, scattering the darkness in our paths with God’s blessing this Advent. May you become the light of God’s grace and mercy to others. Amen

⁴ *Ibid.* - *Pray as you go*

⁵ John P. Burgess. *Feasting on the Word, Advent 1(A)*