

Advent Reboot

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC, on the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2016

http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Advent/AAdv1_RCL.html

Happy New Year!!!!

For those of you who may be confused, today is the First Sunday of Advent, which marks the new year in the church. It seems an odd time to start a new year, doesn't it? It's not the start of a new month on the calendar, and more years than not, it falls on Thanksgiving weekend here in the United States.

But our new year begins with a calling to preparation. To be vigilant and ready for the return of Christ, just as Jesus was telling his disciples to be ready. Our new year coincides with the world's preparation for gift-giving and time with family and (hopefully) some time away from the hustle and bustle of the daily grind. That preparation isn't limited to us Christians, but includes faith traditions accounting for several billion people around the world.

In our tradition, we prepare for the unknown future by remembering God's faithfulness in the past. We put our faith in the belief that the one we proclaim as the way, the truth, and the life, Jesus, will again be among us in the flesh just as he once was many years ago. Each of the next four Sundays, we will light one more candle to remind ourselves and the world that we are *that* much closer to welcoming the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords into the world. It is certainly something we should be working towards every day, but this is the season of the year that we re-double our efforts and our intentionality to make our hearts a place that welcomes Christ. Because if all our hearts can welcome Christ, then the world will be better able to welcome Christ as well.

What does it look like and feel like for our hearts to welcome Christ? For each of us, that answer may be different based on how and where God is calling us and what God is calling us to do. But a renewed devotion to the Scriptures and to our prayer life is one way to start. There a number of devotional guides, both in print and online that are excellent:

- **Goshen College** (Daily Advent and Lent meditations written by faculty and students this Mennonite school in Indiana --
<https://www.goshen.edu/devotions/category/2016-advent/>)

- **Forward Day by Day** (print copies available at in the Reception Area and online at http://prayer.forwardmovement.org/forward_day_by_day.php)
- **Daily Devotions for Families and Individuals**, starting on p. 137 in the Book of Common Prayer
- **eCP app** (Full version of the Book of Common Prayer, with daily Scripture readings, available on iOS and Android -- <https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/electroniccommonprayercp20>)

To make our hearts and communities and world places ready to welcome Christ means that we turn and return to God as our teacher and our judge, in the same way Isaiah talks about in our first lesson when he was offering a word of hope to Judah and Jerusalem all those years ago. Isaiah gives us an image of a God as one to whom **all** peoples, all nations, will gather, and not just for adoration and praise, but for teaching and guidance. Isaiah gives only two active verbs to describe God's work: Judge and Arbitrate. I want us to unpack this notion of God as Judge for a few minutes and what that has to do with the First Sunday of Advent.

When you think of a Judge? What do you imagine? Black robe? Gavel? Sitting above everyone else, saying "over-ruled" or "sustained"? Someone who holds the future of others in their hands? Or maybe you imagine one of these ubiquitous reality shows where three or four "experts" tell contestants more about what they did wrong than what they did well?

What if our image of God as judge were something different than all of that? Instead of someone who pronounces us guilty or collaborates with others to remove us, what if our vision of God as our judge were such that we could see God as the one who was and is and always will be helping us to achieve better, to live more fully into what God has called and made us to be?

What if, in the Olympics for instance, when a gymnast or diver or skater finished, instead of just posting numbers, they let them know where they could improve? I think the show "Chopped"¹ on Food Network comes the closest to this image of Judge that Isaiah talks about. The three experts praise the contestants for what they did right and make a few comments about areas to improve. That's the kind of judge Isaiah is talking about. A world where peoples and nationalities seek the judgement of God to be told how they can improve. Not to be told what they

¹ <http://www.foodnetwork.com/shows/chopped.html>

didn't do right, but how they can improve upon the two great commandments: Love God. Love your neighbor.

Isaiah gives us this image of God as a divine judge, settling disputes between neighbors and families so that peace can be established and maintained. Isaiah is talking to us about what could happen if we put our full faith in God's power and not in the abilities of governments and corporations. Isaiah gives us the meaning of God's justice. God's anger is not kindled because the Israelites were chasing false idols (though that didn't help!) but because in doing so, the gap between the rich and poor continued to widen, and those with means put more energy into having more means than into reaching out to the defenseless and helpless.

The message is that no one, no nation, no people can truly have peace without justice, without seeking and following God's guidance on how we live in right relationship with God and neighbor. When Jesus emerged from the wilderness after 40 days following his Baptism, he could have said, "Y'all are in sooooo much trouble!" But he didn't. What did he say? "The Kingdom of God is here. Now. The mountain of the Lord's house has been established."

In Jesus, God has come near to lead and to teach and to guide us so that the Almighty will be at the forefront of what we do, of who we are, and how we serve. Now is as good a time as ever to begin to examine our lives and our relationships. If we have swords and spears, how can we let God turn them into plowshares or pruning hooks? Where in our daily living can we continue to make ready for the coming of the Messiah into the world? Each candle on the Advent wreath increases our anticipation and hopefully, prayerfully, will make us more ready.

"Oh house of Jacob," Isaiah writes, "Come! Let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Those words are not merely a vision of global transformation but an invitation to live towards that day that is both "already" and "not yet." Those words remind us that the future belongs to God. The first step towards that future belongs to God, even for just a moment and are willing to live boldly and trust that God will always provide enough light to show us the way and help bring the God's Kingdom here on earth.

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