

SACRED PRESENCE

by

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

November 27, 2011

(First Sunday of Advent)

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts:

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; and Mark 13:24-37

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – ²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil– to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. ⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.
²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cock-crow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

If you only live in the secular world, Advent does not exist. You move quickly from Thanksgiving to Christmas. The secular world loves Christmas because it has a dollar sign attached to it. Advent is about waiting and watching with patience. In the world at large, the day after Thanksgiving is known as Black Friday. It is the day that helps to make sure that the retail world will make a profit and finish the year in the black. Even in these days, in less favorable economic times, the crowds of shoppers on Friday and Saturday were large. There are always a few ugly scenes as people shove and push and sometimes worse to be the first one in at midnight or 5 a.m. or whenever the stores open. Rush, hurry, set a frantic pace. That is the agenda for the season if you do not pay attention to Advent.

Advent reminds us to slow things down a bit.

Wait.

Watch.

Keep awake.

Keep alert.

Pay attention to the ways of God. It is a counter-cultural message, but one we all need. All of us get caught up in the rush of this time of the year. Some of you

work retail and you live it every day. All of us become shoppers and make our lists of gifts to buy. It is hard to slow down, but Advent at least tries.

One signal for me every year is how many people say to me during Advent, “Why can’t we sing Christmas carols?” I know. I understand. I love them, too. But it would be a betrayal of the season of Advent that asks us to wait. You wouldn’t expect to sing Easter hymns in Lent! We sing those plaintive cries of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” and “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus,” appropriate hymns for those who observe Advent. Advent is longing for Christmas, longing for a better world, knowing all the while that all good things take time.

Advent is a Latin word that means “coming,” the coming of the Lord. Even if you are not caught up in the rush of the season there is a deeply spiritual longing for God to make the world a better place and to do it now. It is the sentiment expressed in our readings today. Isaiah, the prophet of old, expressed it so vividly and clearly, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence.”

At one level or another, who hasn’t wished for such things, for a better world, for evil to go away, for peace on earth? Even now the world is trying to sort out all of the conflicts and hostilities on our planet. All of us ask why do people do things that hurt and harm others who are different from them? Isaiah’s thoughts run the gamut, as perhaps do ours. Isaiah says, well maybe it is because God is angry or maybe God is just hidden or withdrawn. Then he thinks maybe it is because we have sinned or transgressed. He searches for a reason for evil as do we all.

But the image he leaves us with is an image of Advent, really. God is the Potter and God’s people the clay. It is a patient, yet persistent image of God slowly, yet deliberately, working with clay vessels until God gets it right or until we get it right. The image is that of waiting patiently for good to overcome evil, for light to overcome darkness.

Jewish writer Simone Weil has said that “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.” The waiting of Advent is a patient waiting, but it is

not a passive waiting. It is an expectant waiting, a participatory waiting, noting those places where the presence is already a reality.

Julian of Norwich, a late medieval English female mystic observed that “Repentance makes us clean; compassion makes us ready; and yearning for God makes us worthy.” That really captures the spirit of Advent: repentance, compassion, and yearning. Waiting for the coming of the Lord, but in such a way that when the sacred presence is there, we don’t miss it.

I suppose there has never been a time when waiting for the coming of the Lord did not take place in a chaotic world. For Isaiah, the Hebrews were just returning from exile in Babylon. They were coming home to a devastated land that had not yet been rebuilt. The great temple of Solomon was still in ruins. The people who were still there, who had neither fled nor been carried away into exile, weren’t all that sure they wanted the returnees back. Life was chaotic when Isaiah longed for a better world and the coming of the Lord.

The apocalyptic words of Jesus in the gospel reading also reflect a chaotic time. In Jesus day, it would have been the last week of his life. The next thing that happens in Mark’s gospel is the Last Supper. So, for Jesus it is near the end. The context of his remarks had been a prediction about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. When Mark recorded these words, the setting would have included the actual destruction of the temple in 70 AD by the Romans.

Isaiah’s passage is about the destruction of the first temple. Mark’s context is about the destruction of the rebuilt temple. Whatever Jesus had said about the destruction of the temple took on more significance now that people had actually seen it happen. With Roman soldiers in the streets to put down open rebellion by some of the Jews in 70 AD and the temple itself being destroyed, it was not only a chaotic time, but must have indeed seemed like the end of time to many. Whatever Jesus meant by his ominous words about cataclysmic events in heaven and on earth, those alive at that time must have thought it was all coming about.

Three of the gospel writers include apocalyptic words of Jesus spoken near the end of his life and recorded by the gospel writers sometime after the destruction of

the temple and during a time of persecution of Jews and Christians by the Romans. A longing for the coming of the Lord must have seemed very urgent in that setting. Yet as a sub-layer, even in the words of Jesus amidst the urgency of that generation living to see the reign of God in all of its awe and majesty, there is a caveat that acknowledges that no one knows about such things. Just as Isaiah ends with an image of God as the patient, yet persistent potter, so Jesus simply says, watch, stay awake, keep alert, pay attention for the coming of the Lord, a sacred presence in a chaotic world.

These many years later in our own chaotic times, it is still the word in the midst of all of our secular learnings and our sacred longings. In the midst of a chaotic world, this Advent, wait patiently, yet expectantly, for the coming of the Lord. What we know is that God entered the world in a barn at the edge of town. Perhaps more than any other image, that gives us a clue not only about where to look, but how to look for that mysterious presence in a chaotic world. Wait, watch, yet today God slips in the back door and surprises us from behind.

As G. K. Chesterton put it, “God came down and slipped in the back door to surprise us from behind from the hidden and personal parts of our own being as if we found something at the back of our own hearts that betrayed us into good.”

Even the hurried and the rushed in this chaotic season moving quickly from Thanksgiving to Christmas may be surprised by the Sacred Presence. But more than likely, it will be those who wait patiently and expectantly in this Advent season and who pay attention who will be touched by a Sacred Presence. It is the Sacred Presence that creates possibilities of peace out of chaos.

Martin Luther once said that if he knew the world would end tomorrow, he would plant a tree. What an insightful statement from one who lived 500 years ago. Every ending, by God’s grace, is a new beginning. Every ending gives way to a hopeful future. Advent interrupts the rush from Thanksgiving to Christmas to give time for our longings for a better world to find shape and form. In this season, wait, and watch with patience and expectation.

Sermons are also available pre-printed and on CD. The pre-printed sermons are in the information racks at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockmeyer at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.