

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent Communion Service, November 29, 2009
Lessons: Amos 5:18-24 and Romans 8:14-25

LOOKING FORWARD TO THAT DAY

Now that Thanksgiving has passed and the turkey has been reduced to leftovers, the children start looking forward to Christmas. Anticipation is one the great joys of human life when what we expect is good. We are the forward-looking creature. We surmise that animals do not look forward as we do in our anticipation of what the future might bring that we desire or dread. Animals, we think, live in the present and respond to what is happening; they may seek what they have lost and want back, but they do not seek what they have been promised but have not yet seen, felt, heard, or tasted. We very much doubt that animals envision for themselves a future remarkably different from the present.

The First Sunday of Advent is dedicated to looking forward in anticipation of a new world created by God's redemptive love. We hope for a future we cannot achieve for ourselves, and so Christian life is a struggle to align ourselves with the promises of God made real and effective for us in Jesus Christ. We hope to become as he is. We learn to want for humanity and for all the earth what God wants for us, as we see it in Jesus. We long for a world that works his way: empathy over indifference, compassion over cruelty, respect over scorn, sharing over advantage-taking, trust over suspicion, and strong humility over arrogance that beneath all the bluster and bravado is really quite weak. The brutal try to make up for their weakness with cruelty which makes them feel strong for the moment, as long as they can avoid truly facing their victims.

Sin is human life in alienation, outside the relationships for which we are created. In sin, we do not recognize God as our God or the other person as our sister or brother. Empathy is blocked and compassion overwhelmed by fear, shame, and greed. In sin, we relate to each other through power struggles, identifying others as allies or enemies. God created us for relationship. Sin is our aloneness outside relationship, making God not my God, the other person not my neighbor, and that other group the less-than-human "them" I scorn but also fear. We like to think of sin as immorality or lack of religion, and so cast God in the role of judge whose function is to weigh our good deeds against the bad and reward or punish accordingly. People think they must be weak before God because they see God as power. Jesus showed us the God who has little positive interest in power, whose strength is compassion, and whose idea of triumph is redemption of the enemy.

So, here we are on Advent Sunday looking forward, we say, to what most Christians call the Second Coming of Christ. Theologians call it the Parousia and the Consummation; so you can see why most people just say “Second Coming,” which is, indeed, the future Advent of Christ we have been promised. Most mainline Protestants, I think, prefer not to talk about it at all because it is popularly pictured as a day of terror when God brings the world to an end in fire. We have come to refer to this nightmarish expectation as apocalyptic, even though the word “apocalypse” simply means “revelation,” the revealing of what has been hidden from sight.

This year, I did not use the recommended scripture readings, which are always warnings. Stay awake, be on guard, stand watch lest you be caught napping, and be ready for Christ’s coming. Yes, complacency and loss of anticipation caused by the long delay are real dangers. We too easily settle down and make faith in Jesus Christ a collection of truisms that do not really speak to the questions we would like to ask. Our expectation of change fades, and the thinking of faith turns to rationalizing life as it happens to us, rather than seeking to align life with God’s promises. But, you know, the warnings get overdone, and we forget that God’s power is compassion not brutality and God’s purpose is to redeem not destroy. We forget how much God loves this world God created and has refused to abandon. So, instead of redemptive love, the churches start preaching fear and peddling guilt, and God’s promise of a new world becomes something to dread.

Christian faith is about change in our lives that anticipates the great and complete change in this world and its way of life that we ourselves cannot accomplish. The Christ whose coming is our long-awaited future is the same Jesus who welcomed the children, treated women with respect they had never known, gave hope to those who had lived in despair, and reclaimed the lost and rebellious for God. Jesus’ way of self-giving love was not just a temporary ploy to lure us and reel us in; it was and is and forever shall be the way of life that is true to God. The Advent of Jesus the Christ will bring the triumph of God’s love and mercy. Empathy, understanding, and respect will replace indifference, prejudice, and contempt. Peace will be married to justice rather than conquest and subjugation. The present is not a time to live in fear but to seek the alignment of our lives with these promises of God, so that when Christ comes we will want what he comes to bring us. That’s the challenge to his church: not to make everyone line up in fear or cringe in shame, but to do what we can to pave the way for a world that will welcome him – that will want and long for the day of justice, of peace, of compassion’s triumph over everything that hurts life and destroys people.

We look forward because we have caught a glimpse of something wonderful beyond our experience in this world as it is. We look forward, not just because we want to leave the past behind, but because we know now it can be redeemed. We look forward to embrace

the promised future without abandoning the present, because we trust the Christ who represents to us better life than we have ever known. We must change the tone of the Christian message because too often it is out of harmony with Jesus.

Listen to Paul the apostle as he struggles to find words to tell the Romans of the hope that fills him with anticipation even in the hardest and most discouraging of times. “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” He tells them that God will transform the death agonies of this world into birth pangs for world born anew into Christ’s resurrection. God loves this world and its people, and that love will win, but it will win in love’s way, not power’s way of force and fear. That’s the message of our hope and salvation. What looks like love’s defeat will, like the death of Jesus, turn into love’s everlasting triumph. And so we eat the bread and drink from the cup to proclaim Christ’s death for us Don’t miss the last part: *until he comes*. Amen.