

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent Communion Service November 28, 2010  
Lessons: Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 8:14-21 and Matthew 24:42-44

## THE RIGHT COMBINATION

The First Sunday of Advent always calls us to look forward to the advent or arrival of Jesus Christ which is to be the world's future and the fulfilment of our salvation. We eat the bread and drink the cup proclaiming Jesus' self-sacrifice, *until he comes*. Those who put their trust in him long for the triumph of God's redemptive love over the injustices and cruelties of life in our world. In moments of doubt, we may sigh, "If only," but in faith we join the cry of, "How long, Lord?" *How long until you come to bring an end to the sufferings and humiliations of human life and validate the hopes of those who seek justice, love kindness, and strive to walk with you humbly?*

What bothers me about the church's celebration of the First Sunday of Advent is that every year the suggested readings voice the reminder to look forward to Christ's coming as a dire warning: *stay awake and be ready, lest you be caught off guard and left out of the new life God longs to give us*. Okay, yes, there are times when we need to be warned, aroused from selfish comforts or faith-numbing doubts, and summoned anew to stand up and serve the hope God has given us in Christ. But have we so relied upon warnings and threats that we have twisted the overall message of Christian faith until it is now perceived by many in our Western societies as a gospel of *fear and guilt*? That's the combination people have come to expect from us, and so they shy away. Who wants a weekly dose of fear and guilt? True, both are sometimes needed. Those who use people for their own advantage, who dismiss the sufferings and distresses of the poor, or who blame the victims of greed and bigotry for the problems inflicted upon them need to learn some fear and experience their guilt and shame, but Jesus did not preach fear to the frightened, heap guilt upon people who knew their need to be forgiven, or further shame the already humiliated. He came to deliver us not condemn us. He gave himself to set us free, and the Christ who is our future is the same Jesus who brought us God's compassion and gave us hope.

Advent calls us to look forward, but the discouraged may very well ask, "What do we have to look *forward to*?" In history's darkest times of unrelenting misery, the answer became, understandably, *heaven*. When the bubonic plague was ravaging Europe, what else could the answer be? I've begun reading about the systematic killing of fourteen million people by Hitler and Stalin in what the author calls "the bloodlands" that lie between Germany and Russia. For millions of peasants starving to death in a famine created

artificially to destroy them, what answer could hope give but heaven? We who have not lived in such desperate conditions do well not to judge people who took refuge in the promise of heaven when it became their only hope left.

In the longer view of human history, we live in an age of remarkable privilege. There I sat in our living room Friday morning, writing the first draft of this sermon on a laptop computer while listening to Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and "American in Paris," then Cecil Payne's jazz through earphones attached to an MP3 player. I was comfortably warm because of central heating, a very new convenience in the longer view, and enjoying a cup of coffee afforded me by international commerce and brewed quickly and easily by the power of electricity delivered right into our home. Most of humanity never dreamed of such luxuries. I am speaking this way, not to make light of the fears and doubts that grip both young and old in this time of economic recession and social rage, but rather to ask that we Christians show people that our ultimate hope in Christ is meant by God to infuse the present with compassion, justice, generosity, and a hope that can be shared by all, not hoarded by a privileged few.

The Bible insists upon offering hope for life here and now on this earth because God loves the creation and means to delight in it. This life is not just a test, pass or fail. Jesus says of earth's people, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." What we need to learn is that abundant life does not come from an abundance of possessions. The real stuff of life is relational, starting always with our response to God's love for us and radiating outward to people, to God's other creatures, and to earth itself.

Years ago in a seminar, I heard a minister joke about his reasons for leaving the pastorate for another form of ministry within the church. Making fun of his self-proclaimed lack of talent for preaching, he said that a church member told him at the door after a service, "Pastor, your sermons come like cool water for a drowning man." I'm afraid many in our society view the church as a place they could get cool water when they already feel themselves drowning. Those living with fear, guilt, or shame don't need more from us.

But how can we change the perceptions of people who do not come to hear us? If they don't enter the church, how are they to discover that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not work primarily from fear and guilt but rather from a combination of trust and hope?

The answer is implied in the question itself, is it not? One of our visioning directions is sharing our vision with non-members, with our communities at large, with those who have left Christianity or are the children or grandchildren of people who left Christianity and so know little of Jesus Christ beyond what bloggers post on the Internet, talk-show hosts shout over the airwaves, and out-of-control self-styled ministers rant for profit or just attention.

Millions of people think they know all they need or care to know about Jesus and his followers but have his message wrong and his truth distorted. It is not good enough to reassure ourselves that they misunderstand Christian faith. Don't we need to show them, as well as we can, the real thing?

In the Bible, the predominate way God speaks to us of the future is by *promise*, not threat. The twin responses to promise are *trust and hope*, and so in combination they form the heart of our message to people outside the faith. Not fear and guilt, but trust and hope.

We do need a word of caution. The language of our society speaks of hope in terms outcomes and benefits, of profits and value added. With God, the promise is always personal and so is never just about the outcome, the delivery of the goods. We are not in this thing called *the faith* for what we can get out of it but in response to the One who loves us. Jesus calls upon us to seek first the kingdom of God – the rule of compassion and justice – and then all the rest that is truly good and necessary in life can be added without corrupting us.

Acknowledging that faith is a struggle, Paul says he considers the sufferings inflicted upon him in the present not worth even comparing to the glory waiting to be revealed, and he makes it clear that the salvation of those who hope in Christ is the beginning of salvation for the whole created order. It is not God's purpose to reward a chosen few and punish all the rest forever. That's the world's way: make many labor in misery to provide wealth and luxury for the privileged few. Our hope in Christ is much bigger and better than that. But people need to know the truth about Jesus Christ and the hope he gives us, and they are not coming to us to find out. So, as we say, the ball is in our court. Amen.