

1st Sunday of Advent – 27 November, 2016
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez-Rivera
Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

Today, is the first Sunday of Advent, a “happy New Year’s Day” for the church; yet the readings might leave you wondering where’s the party. If today is the first Sunday of the new year with the great celebration of Christmas just around the corner, *why on Earth* is the Gospel selection from Matthew taken from chapter twenty-four and not chapter one? Good question! Neither the historians nor I are entirely sure of the answer; the records about this are sketchy at best. What I can say about Advent is that it arose out of a season of fasting to prepare candidates for baptism at Epiphany. By the sixth century, eschatological teachings were added to the penitential practices of the catechism (eschatology is the part of theology that is concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of humankind), and the Advent lectionary at the beginning of every liturgical new year starts with today’s lesson of preparation for the final coming of Christ and his divine judgment. Over the next weeks of Advent, we will hear the stories of John the Baptist preparing the way for believers to follow Christ; then about John calling the world to a life of repentance in order to be prepared for eternal life with Christ; and finally, on the last Sunday of Advent, the Nativity story!

My thoughts about the infinite circular nature of God, and why we hear one of the last chapters of the gospel and not the other way around, is an affirmation that the nature of God is inexplicable, unconventional, and timeless. The circular nature of God is an expression of infinity, alpha to omega and back again – all in One. We certainly don’t know *when* the end will come, but we know that it *will* come per the Lord our God. It may be a challenge to think of Jesus’ life beginning anyhow other than in a manger as we learn in Sunday school, but let us not forget that Christ was already “I AM”, at the beginning of time, seated beside God until God determined the right time to be revealed in the body of the Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

Today’s Gospel calls us to be expectant and vigilant of Christ’s coming, as Christ himself said to his disciples: “the day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” “Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” But who among us likes living with uncertainty? I don’t know anyone losing sleep over the kingdom come or the exact day and hour that Christ will return; but we all know people today who are anxious and afraid of what will happen right here in America in the next four years. Today’s gospel story ends by telling us to be prepared. Be prepared for what? We don’t know yet, neither about Jesus or about our government, but of one thing we can be certain, there will be

changes. This world will transform into a new kingdom forever and government, as we know it, will change for a while.

The circle of divine life introduces hope; Christ promises new life. Christ's promise doesn't shield us from an uncertain future but it gives us certainty that we won't face our destiny alone. Christ is with us as he promised in the very last sentence of the twenty eighth chapter of Matthew's gospel, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Come what may come here on earth, Jesus has given us the power of the Holy Spirit to have hope. Hope comes from the knowledge that with his death and resurrection there is the promise of new life in him. Yes, at an uncertain time and with uncertain outcomes, but as promised, Jesus gives us the light of hope. A new life, a new way, new light; hope to overcome adversity and uncertainty even at the end of our lives in this kingdom as we await his coming again.

The theology of eschatology teaches that new life in Christ Jesus will come, so I invite you to ponder what you might dare do with your life now as you wait for the unexpected day and hour. Paul rebuked the people who stopped being responsible in their daily tasks and who stopped doing what was necessary to keep on living. He invited them to act, to live righteously as Jesus taught them to do. We live in a circular world, so what affects one affects us all. What are you willing to do to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit sustains you even in your darkest hours and that you are not alone? One way is to fight fear with love, anxiety with courage, and to face uncertainty with the hope, grace and knowledge that comes from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Despite the anxiety and fear that many have shared with me, there are wonderful stories of hope and grace that I would like to share because they are my sustenance and reminder that Christ is alive in and through us. Minutes after the announcement was made last Sunday calling for St. Gabrielites to sign up as Christmas Elves for Paxton families, every single tag representing different members of the body of Christ had been taken by a St. Gabriel's elf. As Eileen Shaffer walked out the door she turned around to me and with a joyful grin she said that every tag had been claimed by Santa's elves. I was overwhelmed by your grace, the generosity of the souls here, but more so by the knowledge that family's unknown to us will receive the grace of the love of God from people in our spiritual home!

There was another story that filled my heart this week and brought me to tears. Some of you know that one of the guitarists at the 3pm service who is undocumented and a day laborer had quadruple bypass surgery. He has absolutely no family here, except St. Gabriel's; I am registered as his next of kin. He was discharged from INOVA last Tuesday night following a weeklong stay due to pneumonia. Many parishioners visited him while he was in Fairfax and now at home to ensure that he is being compliant with his meds and loved. So, I got a text from

Deacon Holly asking if I knew of a family that might need a Thanksgiving dinner including the turkey. She not only brought the food to the office, but she put it all in my trunk, and on top of it brought the housemates, who are also day laborers, warm winter coats – four in total. When I took all of that to the men they were stunned by the power of our love. I could barely hold back my tears by the joy of their spirits, and the gratitude that flowed from their eyes and smiles.

In the coming weeks of Advent, we will light additional candles, the light will become brighter as we come closer to the celebration of the Nativity. This is a reminder that at the end of Christ's life there was hope and promise of a new beginning through his Resurrection and the promise of eternal glory. May this light remind us all that there is a new day ahead and that regardless of how dark it might get, that we are gathered in love as one body. We are not alone, we at St. Gabriel's are proof of that. Amen.