

Preparation for the Coming of Christ

Sermon: December 3, 2017

The Very Rev. Graham Smith

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Good morning! And a happy new year to all of you.

This, of course, is New Year's Day in the Christian calendar, the First Sunday of Advent.

My name is Graham Smith and thanks to Bishop Brookhart's generous invitation, I have been asked to serve you as the interim Dean of St. Peter's Cathedral.

I have been warmly welcomed here over the past two weeks by both of your bishops and Sue Brookhart, by your Cathedral Chapter and warden, Sara Medley and by Donna Gleaves in our office, who has been patiently bringing me up to speed. I look forward to our ministry together as you continue to search for a permanent Dean over the next several months. Thank you too, for the generous welcome baskets that you left in my apartment.

This appointment came as a big surprise. Your previous interim dean, Paul Bresnahan is a very close and long time personal friend. Our friendship goes back to seminary at the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Paul officiated at our wedding in 1973. I talked to Paul yesterday and he is doing very well with his leg now that he has plenty of time to rest.

Before getting into this morning's sermon, let me briefly introduce myself. My wife Sherry and I live in Portland, Oregon where our son and daughter-in-law have blessed us with three grandchildren. Sherry is not with me today, but will be joining us in two weeks for the Christmas celebrations. I have had to learn that when my wife has a choice between being with the grandchildren and being with me, I lose!

We also have a daughter and son-in-law in Chicago who just had a baby. They joined us for Thanksgiving, so our whole family was together.

Most recently, I served as the Dean of St. George's College in Jerusalem from 2011 to 2015. Each year, we sponsored some 400 pilgrims in more than 20 courses throughout the Holy Land and adjacent countries. In the fall of 2014, I met Bishop Burkhart and Susan, who attended our course called "Ways in the Wilderness", That course included much of the desert experienced by Moses and the Israelites after the Exodus. The course then crossed into Jordan where we visited the place where Lawrence of Arabia lived as well as the famous Petra, the ancient resort city of the spice trade, which flourished for several centuries before and after the time of Christ.

I look forward to sharing with all of you some of the places Sherry and I visited during our time with you. We look forward to showing you some of the holy places from Nazareth and Bethlehem at Christmas to Holy Week and Easter in March and April.

Prior to our time in Jerusalem, Sherry and I served parishes in Cleveland, Ohio and Chicago, Illinois over 37 years.

Now to the Scripture which we heard today on this first Sunday of Advent. The Gospel is from the 13th chapter of Mark, where we hear about the final coming of Christ at the end of time.

Jesus said, "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the powers in the heaven will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with power and great glory...."

But then Jesus gives a clear warning. "About that day or the hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. So, beware and keep alert. Keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come."

It is important to remember that Jesus is talking about his final coming at the end of time. Sometimes we misunderstand this passage by calling it Jesus' 'second' coming. The truth is that Jesus is present with us all the time through the presence and power of His Holy Spirit. We will be hearing more about Jesus' Holy Spirit next week when we read of John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus' coming. John will say very clearly that he is not the Christ. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

When Jesus gave us the gift of his Holy Spirit at Pentecost, he promised to be present with us always. The gospel story we heard this morning is about Christ's coming is at the end of time. But before the end of time there are occasions too many to number when Christ has come and been present with each of us. He is present wherever we are. He is present whenever we pray or read the scripture. He is present whenever and wherever he is acknowledged. He is present whenever there is an act of kindness or an act of forgiveness. And most importantly, Jesus is present whenever His blood is shared and His bread broken to feed the world.

So, on this first Sunday in Advent, may we give thanks for the countless times Jesus is present with us, not just at the end of time.

Secondly, I want to say a word about the meaning of this season of Advent. Often at this time, we speak of the coming of Jesus as the second Adam, the one who came to save us from the sins of the first Adam. You will remember that God created the first Adam and the first Eve back at the beginning of creation in the opening chapters of the bible, in Genesis. Adam and Eve are living in a garden of paradise where they are instructed to eat of the fruit of any of the trees in the garden, but they are forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve disobey God's limits. After eating of the forbidden fruit, they feel guilty, so they run away and try to hide from God.

I once heard a bishop teaching on this story who had a wonderful phrase for Adam after he disobeyed God and tried to hide from Him. He called it, "Adam on the run". When we disobey God, we fall into a condition of being 'on the run'. Human beings in a state of disobedience are 'on the run'. That is the bad news!

But there is good news! The good news is that God is 'on the search'. God does not abandon us when we disobey and run away. God goes after us, seeking us, chasing us, pursuing us. Because it is in his loving nature not to let us go our own way into self-destruction. There is 'Adam of the run' but there is

also 'God on the search'. In fact, the whole bible is a story of humankind running from God and God going after humankind. Advent means coming. It is that season when we prepare for God's coming in Christ.

There is a famous poem by a man named Francis Thompson, called the 'Hound of Heaven' which describes Jesus as a hunting dog going after his own who are trying to run away from him. It is the eternal story of man's rebellion and God's salvation, a story which God wins.

The 'Hound of Heaven begins like this:

I fled him down the nights and down the days. I fled him down the arches of the years.

I fled him down the labyrinthine ways, Of my own mind;

and in the midst of tears, I hid from Him

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

But with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace.

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,

they beat—and a Voice beat

More instant than the Feet,

'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me'.

Advent is the season when we prepare for the coming of Christ. Christ does not stay up in heaven ignoring a world of human suffering. Christ is not aloof or indifferent. He leaves his place in heaven and comes down to be one of us. He is not only one of us, but a servant of all. He lays aside his rights and privileges of being divine and is willing to live among us as a human being.

In Advent we prepare for a God who pursues us. God's pursuit is an incredible act of kindness. God's act of kindness is an invitation for us to respond to others with kindness.

I once had a jeweler in my parish who told me that he was especially busy at this time of year because many couples would come into his store wanting to buy an engagement ring. They were likely to be anxious and nervous. He would make an intentional effort to be attentive and kind to them'

As a part of our preparations for Christmas, I want to challenge each of us to plan one act of kindness this Advent toward someone outside our immediate family. Such an act of kindness could be one way of intentionally making room in our busy schedule, for Jesus.

May we encourage one another to do just that so that in the midst of our other preparations, we may be especially attentive and alert for Jesus' birth. Amen