

## ADVENT 1C: "THE SPIRIT MOVES US TO HOPE"

Stand up and raise your heads!  
Be on guard! Be alert at all times!  
Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

These are phrases from our gospel that introduce us to the Advent season. Can it be? Is it December already?

"Happy New Year!" The church's calendar year begins again with another Advent-Christmas cycle. Using the greeting of our council president, Tim Peifer, "A Joyous Advent" to you!

Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of God. In the midst of the busyness of life, the endless streaming of carols in stores, and the decorations, we are invited to pause, to reflect, to inwardly prepare for the coming of God as a child, as our present help in times of trouble, and as the Son of Man who will come with power and great glory.

Advent is a time of hope-filled prayer for God to come and free us from "the threatening dangers of our sins," as the Prayer of the Day so eloquently states. Having offered to God last Sunday our time, talents, and treasures—adoring Christ with our lives—we are tempted in this season to adore everything that money can buy, to be dazzled by the latest gadgets and gifts. Advent is a time to put all that into perspective by seeing everything from God's perspective. It is a time to yearn for something more in our lives, something which only God can give.

Those of us who are older will remember that, for a long time, the traditional color of this season was purple, reminding us that our preparation should include inward reflection and repentance. We are invited to turn away from the glamour and glitz of this season, and the racks upon racks of clothes in the department stores, to an alternate Advent—a simpler, leaner, more authentic life of sharing what we have with others. How counter-cultural Advent is! But, the fact of the matter is, that it was that way from the beginning of the church.

The season of Advent developed over the first four centuries as a parallel to Lent—as a 40 day period of preparation over six weeks time leading up to the major festival of—no, not Christmas, but rather—the Baptism of Our Lord! The earliest of believers wanted to be doused in the same waters of baptism in which Jesus had been set apart. They wanted to take on his life, his very being, and become one of his followers.

The early believers in Thessalonica, to whom Paul wrote in our second lesson, wanted to lead simple, holy lives so they were prepared for Jesus' return. They looked past this life and set their sights on the glorious life to come. Their baptism into Christ opened them up to the work of the Holy Spirit. Despite all the challenges they faced, and there were many, through the Spirit's movement in their lives, they held on to the hope of Jesus' promises. The early believers in the church at Thessalonica used coins that named Julius Caesar as "God" and the Emperor Octavian as "the son of God." Talk about counter-cultural! These saints of God may have had to trade in such coins, but they believed in and placed their hope in God's true and only Son. You and I have the same call, as hard as it may be, to oppose the forces in our culture that lead us away from God and from our baptismal

mission. So the question is, are we open to the Spirit's urgings as those first believers were?

One of descriptor words of our congregation's mission statement is "Open." As the baptized people of God at Muhlenberg, we pledge to be open to all that God has in store for us, and especially today, to be open to the movement of the Spirit in our midst. So what are the Spirit's urgings in our gospel this morning?

At first glance, things look bleak—distress, confusion, roaring, fainting, fear, shaking. It sounds an awful lot like the scenario that struck the town of Paradise, CA. The scene brings to mind the videos of so many who escaped the wildfire as it engulfed that town. Or we might think of the recent earthquake in Alaska. "Be on guard! Be alert!" Jesus says to us.

Don't be weighed down by decadence, by overconsumption (think department stores full of racks of clothes).

Don't be tempted by excess food and drink (think extravagant Christmas parties and self-indulgent drinking).

Don't get caught up in all the worries of life (think of your schedule this coming week).

Be alert! Stay awake! Pray that you may be strong! Watch so that the coming of the Son of Man doesn't catch you off-guard! The gospel is a trumpet call, isn't it? It's a sharp reminder to us not to be won over by the gaudiness, glitziness, and giddiness of the season, but to dig deeper, to find where the Spirit of God is creating hope, and where God is bringing life out of death even among us now.

That's where the fig tree comes in! In a way, the fig tree reminds me of the Survivor Tree at the 9/11 Memorial in NYC. In the collapse of the twin towers and the terror of that day that had all the signs and forebodings of our gospel, a tree, which stood only yards from the twin towers, was burned and broken; yet, its roots were strong enough so that it could be nurtured back to health. Today the Survivor Tree is a bold symbol that God brings life out of death and hope out of despair. We have our own survivor tree here at Muhlenberg. In the front of our church stands an elm tree that survived the Oklahoma City bombing and is a reminder that God can bring hope out of despair.

Such is the message of the fig tree. The signs of the end time may be all around us, but there is nothing to fear. As we open ourselves to the movement of God's Spirit this Advent, we are filled with the hope that comes in spring as trees sprout their leaves, and in summer when the fig tree bears its fruit. Advent is a time to look inward, yes, to remember how we are to live as the baptized, but it is also a time to look outward with confidence and expectation of our Lord's coming. This hope within us is so strong that nothing can overcome it. As the prophet Habakkuk (3:17-18) said:

Even though the fig trees have no fruit and no grapes grow on the vines,  
 even though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no grain,  
 even though the sheep all die and the cattle stalls are empty,  
 I will still be joyful and glad, because the Lord God is my savior.

This Advent we are not to be dour and sour, but wait for Jesus' coming with joyful hope. "Stand up and raise your heads!" Jesus said. We are to be proud of our faith in the coming Christ! And be confident of his words and plan for us and for our life together! As we commune, we can hold our heads high and envision our feast together in the kingdom of God. Stand tall, people of God, with heads lifted high!

And there's even more Spirit-filled good news! Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Jesus' words that bring us comfort and hope in the present, his words that forgive our sins and renew our spirits, his words that proclaim victory over death and the grave, his words that move us to care for each other and to be fair and kind to everything God has made, those words are sure and they are true.

What words of Jesus inspire you at the beginning of this new church year? The Spirit of God is opening our hearts to receive them and bring us hope.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

"Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. I go to prepare a place for you. And I will come again and take you to be with myself."

Or, his words spoken from another tree--the tree of death that became for us the tree of life:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

"Today you will be in Paradise with me."

"Son, here is your mother. Mother, here is your son."

There will be an end to everything except these words. They will remain. They can be trusted. Through this Advent and every Advent to come. Until that day when the Lord puts his hands on our shoulders and gently rouses us from sleep.

So brothers and sisters, this Advent let us think deeply about God's coming in Jesus, so we are prepared for the story of his birth and stay alert for the new creation to come. Let us be filled with the hope the Spirit brings as represented by the fig tree and the Survivor Trees and, most of all, by the tree of the cross.

And let us pray, as did the believers at Thessalonica: Maránatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Through your Spirit open our hearts and lives to the future you have planned. Fill us with hope as we await your coming. Amen.