

Let Us Put On Christ

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Welcome to the season of Advent.

I was raised in the Methodist Church, and we did not observe Advent. I joined the Episcopal Church while I was in college and soon learned that Advent was a season of preparation and waiting. Initially, I presumed that we were preparing and waiting for Christmas. Watching other Episcopalians, I quickly learned that we don't decorate for Christmas until at least the third Sunday of Advent and absolutely do not sing Christmas music until December 24 at midnight mass. I became a bit of a zealot for a long time, grumping about radio stations, lights in the neighborhood, and Christmas parties thrown throughout December.¹

It wasn't until about ten years later that I began to understand the season more deeply. I learned that "Advent" comes from a Latin word, meaning "coming" and that, since the 4th century, Christians have observed

¹ I've since lightened my approach to the season, though I do wait to put up a tree still.

the season as a time of preparation, not for the birth of Jesus which has already taken place, but for the return of Jesus. I learned that “Joy to the World” isn’t a Christmas Carol at all; rather, it anticipates Jesus’ triumphal return and the consummation of history in his glorious reign. Advent, then, is the time for “every heart” to “prepare him room!”

These theme of preparing for the return of Christ is reflected in our collects for the season, the weekly prayers that open our services. Look again at our prayer today:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; ***that in the last day, when he shall come again*** in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, ***we may rise to the life immortal . . .***

Our readings this week likewise focus us on preparing for Christ’s return. We see this most clearly, perhaps, in our reading from Matthew. It comes just after Jesus has told his disciples he’s going away: “You will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” The anxious disciples, full of questions, have asked: “When will this be? . . . What will be the sign?”

Jesus' response does little to quell their anxiety and, if we're honest, does much to provoke ours. He describes the destruction of the Temple, speaks of "nation rising against nation", and forewarns famines, earthquakes, persecutions, and torture. He speaks frequently about his "elect." False prophets will seek to lead them astray, and the angels will gather them up at his coming. My anxiety is provoked when Jesus refers to signs that will precede his return, leaving me tempted to try to ascertain whether these signs have taken place or are still to come. My anxiety is further provoked by Jesus talk of his "elect." I can tell that's the group for me, and I'm left wondering whether I'm among them.

Our passage today picks up in the middle of Jesus' response to the anxious disciples. We see both of these points of concern reflected here.

First, Jesus compares his return to the days before the flood when people:

were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage ... and knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away.

Then, Jesus describes how:

Two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

There's a lot of eating and drinking now; are we about to be swept away like in the flood? Which woman am I – the one taken or the one left?

Yet, I don't think Jesus wants us to respond by looking around at the world in fear and anxiety to see if the signs have taken place. Look at how our reading begins today. "About that day and hour," Jesus says, no one knows ... only the Father." A few sentences later, he reiterates this point: "you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

Leaving behind the effort to decipher the how and the when, but holding tightly to the fear that drove me to that exercise, I'm still left wondering how, whenever the day comes, I might be counted among those taken away with the Son of Man – how to avoid being left behind. I haven't read the Left Behind books, but I know being left behind is a bad thing. There's a "Rapture" coming in which Jesus will return to rescue and deliver Christians *from* the earth *to* a place called heaven. Right?

Wrong.

When Jesus spoke of God's ultimate plan, he didn't talk about rescuing people from earth and taking them to heaven, but about *bringing heaven and earth together*. He talked of rescuing *creation itself*.

Scripture's conclusion – the end of The Revelation to John – portrays God doing just this: creating a new heaven and a new earth, which are ***one and the same place***.² Our Christian hope is not that we'll be raptured, but that we'll be left behind to experience this re-created Heaven-Earth.

More to the point, whether we think the goal is to be raptured or to be left behind to live in God's new Heaven-Earth, if we only hear this question about our inclusion in the text, we've missed Jesus' point.

Three words signal that point: "Keep awake therefore." It helps to invert them: "Therefore," signaling that his conclusion is coming, "keep awake."

Jesus continues with the parable of the householder and the thief: "If the owner had known when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake. Therefore," there it is again ... "you also must be ready."

Wake up! Get ready!

Advent is an opportunity for us to discern how we are asleep, how we may be turning a blind eye to suffering in the world, to opportunities to participate in Christ's work in our midst. Advent is a time to ask, "Are we

² For more on this, see NT Wright's *Simply Good News* in the Chapter called "Rethinking Heaven."

ready?” – to invite God to show us how we may be unprepared to welcome Jesus into our midst. Paul offers valuable guidance for all who undertake this work. He calls us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” How do we put on Christ?

Christians understand that we begin this work in baptism. Would you open your Book of Common Prayer to page 302?

The work of putting on Christ begins with three foundational renunciations. Do you renounce

- Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God,
- the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and
- the sinful desires that draw us from the love of God.

This is followed by three foundational promises. Do you promise

- to turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Savior,
- to put our whole trust in his grace and love, and
- to promise to follow and obey him.

Now, turn with me to page 304. There we find five additional promises, which when followed, guide us into adherence to the foundational renunciations and promises. In baptism, we promise

- to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers (to come to Church);
- to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord (to examine our lives for sin and make our confession);
- to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ (to share Jesus with other people);
- to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; and
- to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

In this season of Advent, I am planning to pray daily with these promises, asking God to show me where I may need to put on a little more of the Lord Jesus Christ and recommitting myself to my baptismal covenant. I want to challenge you to do this work with me. And, we don't do this often in the Episcopal Church, but if you are here with us tonight and are not yet baptized, I absolutely won't baptize you right now. But I would love to meet you and talk with you about how you can begin this work through your prayers this season and how to prepare to be baptized into Christ.

It isn't easy work, honestly examining our lives to discern where we are falling short of God's call and finding that we are, indeed, asleep and unprepared for Jesus' return.

The Good News today is that God, through Christ, is preparing a place for us by making all things new. Each of us is invited, called, and uniquely gifted to participate and to draw others into this new place.

Hear from this weekend's reading from Paul the invitation to the work of Advent and to participation in God's new world:

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. . . . Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light . . . let us put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Amen.