

## First Sunday of Advent – Dec. 2-3, 2017

Today we begin the season of Advent. Pope Benedict said that for Christians, Advent means both presence and anticipation. Namely, Christ has come, is coming and will come again. We need to recognize how Christ is indeed with us, and we need to prepare for his coming in glory.

Christ, the New Adam, is in our midst and among us. His light is already shining, and we must open the eyes of our hearts to see this light and be grateful that God himself has come into this world to help us and heal us.

But Advent also means anticipation – waiting for fulfillment of God’s graces and actions. The dark night of evil is still strong. Therefore, in Advent we continue to pray for Christ to come. – Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, prays Isaiah.

God certainly had come and delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and many other things, but by sin she has rebelled against God and cast God off. They wonder whether God has also cast them off, but they also hope for mercy and that God will come and remake them worthy of his love. “You are the potter and we are the clay – work of your hands.” This is a powerful statement.

As God servants, we need to continue to do our work to be ready for his coming again, but as clay in God’s hands, we must remember that ultimately we are the work of God. It is he who plans and shapes our lives. Therefore, we need to be always watchful for his direction. In this regard, the psalmist today, doesn’t expect action from us – “Make us turn to you, he says, and we shall be saved.”

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Today the Church throughout the world comes together in gratitude and faith in God, yet at the same time many do not see God and we ourselves

struggle because of sin to see God in our own live.

Paul reminds us that by God's grace we have been enriched in every way in discourse and knowledge and are not lacking in any spiritual gift. Yet – how aware of and grateful are we for all the gifts that God has given us?

Are we not at most times more aware of the difficulties of this life and the seeming absence of God than we are of God's gifts?

Nevertheless, Paul assures us that God will keep us firm in faith until Christ's coming in glory.

So – again we see – as Pope Benedict that Advent and our life is presence and anticipation.

As we begin a new church year and prepare for the celebration of Christ's birth how much are you aware of how God has placed in our hearts a desire or anticipation and longing for something deeper in our relationship to God and to others?

As one person said – our whole life is an Advent – a prelude to the life of God to come. Advent challenges us to see our lives not as a disconnect set of circumstances and experiences but as a pilgrimage to God – a journey in which every moment there is a new revelation of God's presence in our midst such that God is both the road we travel and the destination of our journey.

This year I am celebrating my 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ordination which you are invited celebrate with me next weekend, but it might helpful for your own spiritual journey to know that for the first 15 years of ministry I was more focused on my work than on my relationship with God or others.

As the oldest child in my family my tendency is to be conscientious and focused on getting things done and doing things better each year. However, about 25 years ago, I started to be

aware that my focus and motivation was more on doing things than on God or the people I was serving, and I had this empty feeling inside.

For about the next 20 years I was aware of my faith being in my head but not in my heart, and this was always part of my discussion with my spiritual director and the focus of my retreats.

I saw what was missing, and wanted something deeper, but it was not happening. – Why not?

I believe the answer or reason is that like the rest of the world I kept myself so busy, and that I did not give up or give over -- not just my time -- but also my life and ministry to God.

In the last five – six years I have started to do that, and it is making a powerful difference in my life. ---- All that grace and giftedness that St. Paul speaks of – I now truly know it is there in my life and in others – and knowing that power and potential that is in me and in you excites me -- not that I fully use it yet, but I know it is there.

What is making the difference? -- it is not so much the quantity of time for God, but quality of time. I have told you about the well-known speaker and preacher, Fr. Larry Richards, who talks about deciding (besides the usual time for praying the liturgy of the hours throughout the day) to give just 5 minutes totally to God and how that changed his whole life.

I have started to do that and to do that consistently every day and even throughout the day to be more mindful of God and it is making a difference in my life – this taking time to simply be aware of listen to God in a focused way.

I tell you all this because this is basically what Jesus is calling all of us to do as we start off this Advent and new church year.

As I wrote in the bulletin in the Questions for the Road?? column, the Advent call expressed by Jesus in today's Gospel – to be “Watchful and Alert” must be more than a passive waiting – or even doing our routine preparations for Christmas in better ways.

Doing the same good things better will not change the basic result. We will not go deeper in our relationship with God. We will not tap into the deeper graces of God that we have been given by working harder and better.

Advent watchfulness challenges us to put our spiritual lives in order. It challenges us to put Christ first in our lives over all other activities, ambitions or involvements.

The season of Advent, though busy on the outside with all the usual preparations for Christmas, is actually the quietest and most reflective season of the church year.

Think of Mary, carrying Jesus for 9 months in her womb and pondering what her child would be like. Advent is a time for us to be particularly alert to the urgings and promptings of God's grace. --- let us ask ourselves in what specific ways are we being called to change our lives?

Then, after reflecting on these promptings that God is sending us --- let us talk openly with God about them as the Israelites did in the first reading through Isaiah. --- we need to act on those promptings – even if it is the smallest change in our day. Maybe just “5 minutes” each day.

For example, Advent is a time for intentional, generous good works to take the place of too much concern for ourselves. A spirit of openheartedness in our actions makes room for a greater presence of Christ in us. That is really what Christ was aiming at in coming to us. We need to think of Christ seeking to become

**incarnate – to come and be present in the world--  
through each of us.**

**Keep in mind also that too passive a waiting for  
the coming of Christ may find Christmas coming  
and going with little change in our lives. But,  
active and intentional alertness to the coming of  
Christ will bring about the fulfillment of Christ's  
great promise – one of my favorite verses of  
Scripture – “I came so that you might have life,  
have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10).**

**“I came so that you might have life and have it  
more abundantly.” --- That is why Christ is so  
urgently calling us to “watch and be alert” daily  
and always for his coming.**

**He does not want us to miss the new life and  
transformation wants to share with us now  
already in this life which will as well as to be  
ready for his coming in glory.**