



Not Yet but Even Now

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2007 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; and Matthew 24:36-44.

Late in 1943, imprisoned by the Nazis for his resistance to Hitler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend: Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent - one waits, and hopes and potters about, but in the end what we do is of little consequence, for the door is shut and can only be opened from the outside. [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison* (New York: MacMillan, 1972).]

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new Christian year, and our readings begin this morning, not with the first chapter of salvation history, but with the last and final chapter. In Isaiah's vision, picture it if you can, the brilliant city of Jerusalem perches on the crest of Mount Zion above all other mountains like the crown jewel of heaven. Men, women and children from all the nations of the earth stream toward the gates of the holy city in pilgrimage and procession from as far as the eye can see. They sing as they approach, calling to each other in jubilation and song, eager for instruction and revelation. In trust, they bring their disputes to God for arbitration and judgment. We can almost hear the thundering sounds of the forges as they convert swords into plowshares – weapons of war into instruments of peace. It may take time to turn the tools of war into tools for the harvest, but we can almost sense the excitement and exhilaration of the crowds.

In response, today's psalm is a psalm of ascent, which is to say it was sung as pilgrims climbed the endless flight of stairs that led through the great pilgrim's gate into the holy city of Jerusalem itself. You can see them with your mind's eye, climbing the great stairway, singing the words we just sang. After miles and miles of walking they have at last arrived. They sing, "Now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem." (Psalm 122:2-6). At last, at last we have arrived!

Isaiah would be deeply troubled to hear that Americans are afraid to mix religion and politics, because, for Isaiah, the reign of God is marked by the transformation of the international political order. All nations will stream to its light. Nationalism and conflict will give way to unity and peace. The role of God, the divine judge, is important to this passage, because peace without justice is tyranny. Judgment and justice are two sides of the same coin. There can be no peace, no reconciliation and no love without them. However, there is no note of condemnation here. Isaiah's vision was not an idealistic fantasy of some sort. It

was a practical proposal for the immediate future. He doesn't assume that the nations will come to some sort of a common mind. God settles the disputes of the nations because the *nations* bring them for resolution, so peace can be established and maintained.

These images are given to us on this day to awaken our sense of anticipation and expectancy for the coming of Christ. The good news is the announcement of the impending reign of God. Victory is at hand. The kingdom, though not yet, is even now in sight. The sun may not have risen yet, but the horizon is already bright with the light of the coming dawn. It falls to us as Christians that even in the midst of the world's trials and tribulations, we serve as watchers. We do not curse the darkness; we light candles, and we live with one eye on the eastern sky, scanning the horizon for signs of the new day's dawning. We are harbingers and heralds of the return of Christ and the coming reign of God.

The epistle tells us, "...you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. The night is far gone; the day is at hand" (Romans 13:11f.). In other words, now is the time to throw off the covers, pull up the shades, and wrap yourselves in the light of day. We live between the ages, between darkness and light, and it is now time to prepare for the dawn of paradise.

Charlene Elizabeth Fairchild writes, "It was the first Sunday in Advent and my husband ... rather gingerly, brought up the subject of Christmas, knowing that I was immersed in the full bloom of grief. Mom had died on Labor Day and this was the first Christmas to be marked without her. I did not feel like Christmas.

"I remembered the reading from Romans that morning, The night is far gone, the day is near let us put on the armor of light put on the Lord Jesus Christ. The season celebrating His birth and looking for His coming again was upon me and I was being called to participate. But it was beyond me to rejoice. As I said these things to my husband, he reminded me that God IS able even if I was not. He mentioned the parable of the mustard seed to me. God could take that little mustard seed and make of it something worthy. God could take that tiny seed of faith and grow it into a kingdom of hope

"I felt as if I had been touched. I got up and went to the kitchen and rifled through my spices. Yes! There it was. My bottle of mustard seeds. I got one out and grabbed a piece of paper from the pad by our phone and taped that mustard seed to the center. I returned to the dining room, waving the paper triumphantly. I've got it! I've got it! I CAN celebrate this year. My husband said, Here, let's put it up on the mantel. It'll be our first Christmas decoration. Up it went. Every time I looked at it, I was reminded of the hope it symbolized and the faith it embodied. I couldn't do it on my own. But God could. And God did!" (Homiletics: A Mustard Seed Christmas, www.rockies.net.)

Advent is the season of preparation.

There is an old story told of a jester who sometimes had very wise things to say. One day, however, he said something so foolish that the King, handing him a staff, said to him, "Take this, and keep it until you find a bigger fool than yourself."

Some years later, the King was very ill and lay on his deathbed. His courtiers were called; his family and his servants also stood round his bedside. The King, addressing them, said, "I am about to leave you. I am going on a very long journey, and I shall not return again to this place, so I have called you all to say, 'Goodbye'."

Then his jester stepped forward and, addressing the King, said, "Your Majesty, may I ask a question? When you journeyed abroad visiting your people, staying with your nobles, or paying diplomatic visits to other courts, your heralds and servants always went before you, making preparations for you. May I ask what preparations your Majesty has made for this long journey that he is about to take?"

"Alas!" replied the King, "I have made no preparations."

"Then," said the jester, "take this staff with you, for now I have found a bigger fool than myself." (*Stories for Sharing by Charles Arcodia, E. J. Dwyer, Australia, 1991, p. 18.*)

It's all about preparation. During the year ahead we will be reading from Matthew's gospel. Our readings this morning call the church to live the future vision in the present so that the future vision begins to live in us, transforming us, and the world in which we live. The kingdom, though not yet, is even now in sight.

In today's gospel, Jesus reminds us that in the days of Noah, people went about eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and going about business as usual, up until the moment they were faced with a tidal wave. They never saw it coming. Noah alone received warning. Unlike those around him, Noah dedicated himself to building a boat. He gave up his usual business. As God directed, he gathered gopher wood for the construction of an ark. He was told to cover it with pitch, inside and out, and he did. He was told to make rooms in it, and he did. He was told to make it three hundred cubits, by fifty cubits, by thirty cubits, and he did. He was told to make a roof for it, and set a door in its side, and he did. He was told to make it with a lower deck, a second deck, and a third deck, and he did. He was told to gather seven pairs of clean animals, those used for sacrifice, and one pair each of unclean animals, and he did (Genesis 6:14f.). While his neighbors went about their business as usual, Noah was the only one engaged in preparation. One might suppose his neighbors thought him rather odd. After all, if you were to begin constructing such a thing in your back yard, what would your neighbors say?!

Advent is rather like building an ark. That's why you have an ark on the front of your bulletin today. The ark here is a sign of preparation. Every Sunday that we gather for worship, we add to the boat. Like Noah, the church is in the business of boat building. Every morning when we rise early for prayer, we make a little more progress. Every time we comfort a child, serve those in need, pay our pledge, advocate for peace, feed the hungry,

pray with the dying, shelter the homeless, and visit those who are sick or in prison, we add another several cubits to the ark. Boat building is our usual business. We must look odd to our neighbors, especially during Advent, when the secular world is dressed in holiday red, and the church is adorned in the blues and purples of Advent. How strange we must look to the world when we celebrate the twelve days of Christmas while our neighbors are taking down their holiday decorations. But not to worry, we are people who have been given directions on how to prepare, and together we are building a boat. Preparation is our usual business.

Rose Marie Berger, writing in *Sojourners* magazine (January 2004), reflects on her childhood and tells of how her father built a small manger from scrap wood. Every evening during Advent her parents asked her and the other children what acts of kindness they did that day. For each one they could put a piece of straw in the manger. The warmth and welcome of the baby Jesus on Christmas reflected the quality and the quantity of kindness they showed to the poor during Advent.

And so we renew our preparation for the coming of Christ for the kingdom, though not yet, is even now in sight.