
Homily

The Reverend Deacon Edward Fuller
Sermon on Advent 1 - December 2, 2007
The Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip - Atlanta, Georgia

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

Good morning and welcome to this first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of the new Church liturgical year.

The name Advent comes from Latin words, one of which is *adventus* meaning "an arrival", and refers to Christ's coming into this world.

Throughout the history of the church, the few weeks preceding Christmas have been set aside for preparation and the tradition has evolved into our current day Advent season. It is that period of the year during which the Church invites the faithful to prepare for the celebration of the Feast of The Incarnation, the anniversary of the birth and coming of Jesus Christ.

But, the focus of Advent is by no means limited to Christ's first coming. We heard an equally important theme in today's Gospel reading, which was Jesus' description of the Second Coming""those events when He comes again to judge the world.

This is a season of "active waiting". We don't do "waiting" very well in today's culture. Many of us pay our bills and do our banking on the internet where the only waiting is the nanosecond required to see confirmation of the transaction on our monitors. We no longer "wait" in line with others; we simply make a few key strokes and then move on to the next thing on our list.

I was standing by an elevator in Chicago recently, the "down" button had been properly depressed and a light was glowing signifying the success of that operation. After a few moments, at least three people reached out and "punched" the button again, unable to restrain themselves and "wait" for the elevator's arrival. As children we are taught to be patient and wait our turn but all of that gets lost somewhere along the line.

No, waiting is not easy, but that is what we are called to do in this season of Advent; to wait for the coming of Christ and to prepare ourselves to receive Him in all His Glory.

I grew up in a rural Presbyterian church and we did not recognize Advent as a dedicated church season. Our Christmas tree was set up and lighted in the sanctuary in very early December, we sang Christmas carols in the weeks just before Christmas and that time was one of celebration culminating in the grand celebration of Christ's birth on Christmas Eve.

You can imagine my first advent season in the Episcopal Church 20 years ago when I walked in to find none of the beautiful floral arrangements around the altar and the music reminded me more of very solemn times than a time of celebration. I believe I was actually disappointed.

But, over the years I have come to love Advent as a time of personal reflection, a time of preparing myself once again to receive the love of God given to us in this Christ child. A time of intentionally letting go of things of the world. Letting go, albeit briefly, of those things of the world that clutter my life.

Last year I felt as though I needed some time away during Advent if I was going to successfully deal with my "cluttered brain" so I went to the monastic community on the Hudson River north of New York City where I have shared much with the monks over the years. It was a wonderful and quiet time for several days. Quiet in the sense that the pressures and internal noises of everyday life had subsided and I was able to sit in silence until it silenced me. I left there feeling renewed, spiritually rested and ready to experience the coming of Christ with an open heart.

Then, I shifted back into my businessman's mode and thought, gee, here I am in New York, only one hour from New York City, why don't I have my son Connor fly up and spend the weekend in the city with me. Have you ever been to New York on the weekends between Thanksgiving and Christmas? Millions of people flock there to shop, party and enjoy events of the season. The English language simply lacks the proper words to describe how frenetic it is. All of the cabs are occupied, there are long lines for everything and everyone moves at a pace that leads you to believe they have only a few minutes left on this earth and are determined to experience all that they had so far missed in their lives. Well, Connor did, indeed, come to New York and we spent a fantastic weekend enjoying the decorations, site seeing, ice skating and I watched as he shopped with determination for a bargain at Sax Fifth Avenue for his mother's Christmas gift. At the end of the first day I was frazzled and almost ran back to the monastery to escape the craziness going on around me.

Then it occurred to me that preparing for the birth of Jesus and preparing for His second coming would never be satisfying if I didn't learn how to do that in the midst of the wonderful everyday life God has given me. While spiritual retreats are a very important part of my life, if I had to retreat from everyday life to find that time to be with God, if I had to retreat from everyday life to live as God wants me to live then I probably needed to change some things in my life, to reduce the "clutter", to be intentional about living into those things that are revealed to us through scripture and be available to receive Christ at his birth and when He comes again. It also occurred to me that while I was concerned about letting go of some things, I needed to use the Advent season to cling to other things. Things like the smile on the face of my then 12 year old son as he skated around the rink below the giant tree in Rockefeller Center, things like children of God involved in the hustle and bustle of Christmas shopping with smiles on their faces and joy in their hearts. I learned that Advent is about letting go of that which causes me to focus energy on things of this world but it is also about holding on to those things which are gifts from God, those things which renew our faith and those things that cause us to recognize the face of Christ in our brothers and sisters. If you're like me that is much easier said than done. The church knows this as well and that is why we are called to this period of waiting and preparation.

During Advent we are given the opportunity to re-order our lives, to make decisions about commitments and to prepare our lives for this new birth, this fulfillment of God's promise. I do not believe there is a one size fits all formula for this re-ordering of life. Each of us needs to reflect on where we are in our walk with God and make choices. There are risks in this journey as we leave behind the old and comfortable and take on the new and uncertain. But Advent is a time of hope and trust. Advent promises us the joy of new life in Christ and the assurance that God will come to us.

We can trust in these promises just as we can trust in God. Let us prepare for the living God to be with us. Let us be open to see the signs of God's future kingdom and let us trust that God's rule will come in God's own good time.

Amen!

Comments? Contact The Rev. Ed Fuller at: efuller@stphilipscathedral.org