

## Advent 1C

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the period defined by the four Sundays that precede the twelve Days of Christmas.

At St. James, we use blue paraments for the season of Advent.

It may feel like this is an ancient tradition, but actually, throughout history, liturgical colors have varied, even by location.

One cathedral might use gold, another white, another blue for a specific occasion.

Over the centuries, however, more uniformity developed.

Partially through the influence of church supply companies, I suspect, the churches are now mostly in accord.

The Episcopal Church has settled on a choice of either purple or Sarum blue during Advent.

Purple implies penitence, and, as you know, is therefore used during Lent.

Purple is appropriate during Advent because it is also a penitential season.

During these four weeks, we are preparing ourselves for the advent of the Lord into our hearts by shedding the fear, shame, and guilt that keep us from embracing our profound relationship with God and one another.

Many people have noted, however, that Advent is not only about penitence, but also joyful expectation.

To make a distinction between Advent and Lent, they prefer to use sarum blue over purple.

More than anything, however, Advent is about waiting.

Waiting is a profoundly spiritual act, though you may not feel very spiritual when you stand in checkout lines over the holidays.

When we wait, we have an opportunity to put our ego on pause which allows us to broaden our attention.

When we are busy pursuing our interests, perhaps getting that last artificial Christmas tree, which I have heard are in short supply this year, or the last pie pumpkin (as I did last week), our attention narrows and we are not as aware of others or of God.

We are focused on our own goal at those moments.

Once we are in waiting mode, however, we can stop and look around ourselves.

Waiting is not wasted time; it is an opportunity to engage with the world without any agenda.

In spiritual waiting, we are not looking for something specific to happen, but are simply attending to what is.

This creates a space for us to pay attention to others and to pay attention to God's voice in our hearts.

(We talked recently about how God never stops speaking to us in our hearts.)

Opportunities to wait come naturally in life, but sometimes we need to help them along, perhaps by going on retreat.

Jesus tells us that we have all we need to lead a meaningful life.

We need simply attend to what is.

It is like looking at a “fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.”

There is no trick, no secret teaching, no special access.

We just need to pay attention, and we can pay attention when we set aside our ego pursuits.

We thus have everything that we need to build the kingdom of heaven, by which Christ is not referring to some ethereal realm in the afterlife, but to building things that abide right here and now.

The things that last are relationships of hope, love, joy.

You might wonder why relationships of hate do not abide.

Relationships of hate are opportunistic in nature.

That is, they result from our attempts to use others as means to an end, as tools for our desires.

When they do not fulfill that end, do not provide for us the opportunities or entertainment we desire, it is then that we hate them.

It is temporary because, when we are thwarted in achieving our end, we soon look for some other way.

We keep looking for other people to bring us fulfillment, moving from one to the other, temporarily hating those we think stand in our way or do not provide us with the fulfillment we seek.

When we love, on the other hand, we do not require that people fulfill all our needs and do not throw people away, but appreciate them for who they are, with their gifts, their weaknesses, and their shadow selves, as we discussed last week.

We give them the gift of full affirmation.

People do not truly love you until they love all of you, even your negative side.

Otherwise, they are merely using you to receive the benefit of some gift that you possess and, as soon as you stop delivering that gift to them, they move on.

Only love abides.

You have heard the aphorism, perfect is the enemy of the good.

Well, demanding perfection of others is the enemy of love.

It is telling them they are not good enough until they are perfect, which is impossible.

You can see how only loving relationships *could* abide.

All else is passing away.

Things passing away also includes much of what interests people at Christmas—this year’s Christmas hit single, cyber Monday deals, even that warm feeling of nostalgia, bordering on saccharine, that some mistake for “the real meaning of Christmas.”

They will all pass.

The only thing that lasts is relationships that are built on love.

Without them, we eventually find ourselves with nothing.

We are unable to see others clearly, however, when we are busy chasing something else, even those things that we need to chase like getting our taxes paid or making sure the irrigation system has been shut down for winter.

It is when we stop, when we wait that we start to see.

Waiting is essential to building meaningful relationships.

Christ tells us that building meaningful relationships requires some creative destruction.

First, the things that fascinate us, the escape into nostalgia, the false hope that receiving some *thing* will bring us lasting fulfillment, all these have to be destroyed, cast off.

It is a violent process that causes some to “faint from fear and foreboding,” as Christ puts it, but when we experience it, we know that something else is approaching—the kingdom of heaven, relationships of meaning and depth.

We have to let go of what we want others to be for us before we can enjoy what they are.

We have to stop and wait.

“Be on guard,” warns Christ, “so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

When we are weighed down with ego and the worries of this life, then we are trapped.

If we set aside our egos when dealing with other people, then we are able to see more clearly.

We can give others the gift of affirmation.

We also can realize who loves us and who is using us.

We can let go of those who use us and focus on those with whom we can build the kingdom of heaven.

We do not need to fear this creative destruction, the letting go within us or the letting go of those who are not truly our friends.

When we do so, grief turns to joy.

Loss turns to gain.

That is our redemption.

Then we can stand and raise our heads.