

Advent 1B 2023

Welcome to Advent.

It feels like its arrival was a little delayed this year.

Advent did not start on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

This was because Christmas falls on a Monday, so Christmas Eve falls on Advent IV.

That means we will be decorating the church after the Advent IV service and then coming back later for Christmas Eve services.

Advent is the beginning of the new church year, Year B.

That means that we will be hearing a lot from Mark for the next twelve months.

During Advent, it is natural that we are all looking towards Christmas, but the gospel readings for this season are not about the incarnation of Christ as Jesus.

They are about the return of Christ.

When we think about the return of Christ, people tend to want to know when that will happen.

We like the false sense of control that gives us.

In general, we like certainty, clarity and disdain ambiguity and the gray.

As long as there have been humans, it seems, we have wanted God to take a more dramatic, straightforward role in the world.

Way back in the sixth century before Christ, Isaiah wrote, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil--to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.”

We want God to clue us in to God’s plans and to make Godself more concretely obvious in the world, but God has created the world not to fulfill *our* egos, but to train our egos into the paths of love.

If God were going to take care of everything and filed God’s work schedule with us, we would just wait on God to take care of things.

We would not learn much at all.

We want to see God make the mountains quake and force people to act justly, but the much less dramatic day by day is how we are being formed, just as God intended.

Acknowledging that we do not know when Christ will return leaves us open to what is, engaged with the here and now, with those around us, building relationships rather than waiting on God to act.

It casts us back to the day by day, which is exactly where Jesus tells us to stay.

Jesus thus dissuades his disciples from focusing on the future, on the return of Christ.

He explains to them that not even he knows when Christ's return will be.

Rather than try to predict such events, he tells us simply to keep awake, to be in the present moment.

Being in the moment is the best way to allow ourselves to be formed by our experiences.

If we can be honest with ourselves about where we are, what we truly want, good and bad, then we are able to grow.

When we pretend to be other than who we are, righteous, in control, flawless, then we undermine the lessons that life teaches us.

There is a time when Christ will return, will help us to see all that we have hidden from ourselves, but focusing on when that will occur only further distracts us from the lessons at hand.

We embrace the idea that everything has a purpose, but not a specific purpose.

Every time an acorn falls on our heads, or is thrown by a defensive squirrel, we do not say that God caused that specific thing to happen.

We embrace instead the understanding that everything has a purpose in the sense that the way the world was created is purposeful and meaningful.

Our ability to think and question is meaningful, suffering is not purposeless, our imperfection is not a failure or God's mistake, but part of the plan.

Everything has a purpose in the sense that this is the way it is supposed to be in order to achieve God's goal.

When we plant a pollinator in our garden, it is not to attract a specific bee at a specific time, but to increase pollination in general.

In life, we find ourselves in a world in which we face many challenges.

We may struggle for control, for power, in order to achieve some sort of safety.

We may seek to compete with others so that we can have access to the most resources.

This is a normal part of our development, but at some point, if we are paying attention, if we are keeping awake, we begin to realize that nothing guarantees our safety and that we are all in the same boat.

The most effective response to this condition is for us to work together.

Our paths actually lead away from isolation and towards one another.

As I said last week, it helps to realize that we each have different weaknesses, different blindnesses.

I have been trying to think of a way to explain this more clearly and came upon the metaphor of color.

It is as if we are each blind to a different part of the color spectrum.

The person who cannot see red does not realize that there is such a thing as red.

When someone else points it out, it seems nonsensical.

If the person who points it out cannot see green, moreover, then *we* may fixate on that.

“What are you talking about, red? There is no such thing. And why can’t you see this green here? It is so easy to see!”

Smug in our ability to see green, we dismiss the other person.

It is not until we realize that others see things that we do not, and that we are able to see things that they cannot, that we begin to work together.

We reconcile, as it were.

Reconciliation requires humility, the admission that others have gifts that we do not have and that something that is challenging for us may be simple for others.

When there is a war, for example we ultimately long for reconciliation, for people to see one another as the blessed children of God.

It is into just such a community that we invite others.

Once we start to work together, we can feel the spirit moving among us as we no longer stand in its way.

When all work humbly together, we have the entire spectrum at our disposal.

This is the path of salvation, and it does not work well unless we understand that the Holy Spirit is there to guide us all, to mitigate our blindnesses.

God seems to have placed us here to learn how to be a part of something bigger.

People will argue that we can cooperate without God, but in reality, when we do not realize that there is something greater than us, some greater purpose, we tend to fall back into selfishness, as the only reason to cooperate is convenience, and sometimes, it simply seems more convenient to be selfish.

We will not sacrifice our own selfish needs for long, in other words, without a sense of how that sacrifice is meaningful.

Christ came to teach us this lesson, to help us to focus on the realities of the here and now, and will come again to check our progress.

As we go along, he encourages us to keep awake.