

First Sunday of Advent: The Work of Advent

The Christmas music has started up. It is particularly evident on TV Ads and in the stores where the merchants are trying to get us in the Christmas mood of giving, or, at least, buying. It is not that way in the Church, though. Instead of Christmas decorations, there is the purple of Advent. We do not sing Christmas carols yet. In fact, the beginning of Advent presents the exact opposite of the sweet and syrupy Christmas sentiments. Advent begins not with cribs and shepherds and Silent Night, but with the prophecy that God will make a powerful intervention in human history. Look at today's Gospel. It is one of the scariest passages in Scripture: "People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming. The Son of Man will come on a cloud with power and great glory."

God will step in and re-create His world. He will put an end to the exploitation of the poor and powerless. He will punish those who have turned the things of the world into their gods. He will make His presence known to those who think they have hidden themselves from His wrath. His people are to stand straight, raise their heads, for their redemption is at hand. They, we, are to pray for the strength to stand before the Son of Man.

Tough stuff. Not the stuff of Christmas Carols. But, again, this is the beginning of the Advent season, not Christmastime. Advent speaks about preparation and transformation. Preparation for the two comings of Christ. The first coming of the Lord began with the journey to Bethlehem two thousand years ago. The Lord's journey continued onto Jerusalem and to Golgotha. His journey continues through us, the Lord's disciples empowered by the Spirit, to lead the world to Christ. The second coming of the Lord is at the end of time, when Christ will judge those who have lived in love and light and those who have lived in darkness and hatred.

For us in the Northern hemisphere, Advent takes place during the darkest days of the year when there is the least sunlight. The darkest day of the year comes towards the end of Advent on December 21st. Advent is the season of hope because it reminds us that the dark time will come to an end, and that the light of Christ will triumph. Hatred, racism, abuse of all forms, broken relationships, indifference to human suffering, these are part of the dark times of the world. These abominations to God's love will end. We as Church and as individuals are called to work towards their downfall. The transformation of the world from hatred to love is the work of the Christian. The season of Advent reminds us of the work we must do all year. Advent assures us that the work of God will be done as long as we live with God in our lives.

We must fight against the darkness. Advent demands that we ask ourselves where darkness has a hold in our lives. What must be changed for me, for you, to be people of light, not darkness. Maybe we need to give ourselves a Christmas gift by destroying anything in our lives that does not radiate Christianity. Certainly, we have to ask ourselves how we can bring light to those who are in darkness. Is there a gesture we can make to help someone feel better? Perhaps it might only be a smile, but that

would be enough. Perhaps a courteous note in a Christmas card to someone who probably won't receive many cards this year. Maybe we need to say "I'm sorry." It won't kill us, and there are few times we are totally innocent in an argument. Sometimes the most simple gesture on our parts can heal the soul of someone whose world is in darkness.

If we do not allow the light of the Lord to guide us and the fire of His Love to bring warmth to the world, we will be like those six people who were found dead in a cold cave, frozen to death. Their bodies were scattered around the ashes that had been their campfire on a tragic, frigid night. The story goes that each person had a log he or she could have placed on the fire to keep the fire alive, but each refused to do so. Each was convinced that he or she had a good reason for not offering his log. There was a homeless man there who would not give his log because there was also a rich man there. The rich man would not give his log because his contribution would warm someone who was, in his eyes, shiftless and lazy. There was a woman who would not offer her log because she was the only woman there and she wanted to strike a blow against the men who had for all of history put women down. Now there was a Moslem there. He would not give his log because there was also a Jew sitting by the fire. The Jew responded the same way. He wasn't going to give his log up to allow a Moslem to survive. Nor would he share it to save the others, Christians who had persecuted his people throughout the ages. There was an African American there who decided that he would rather freeze to death as a statement against those around the fire whose ancestors had enslaved his ancestors. And so the fire died as each person withheld his or her log for reasons he or she were sure were justifiable. And the six froze to death.

The story was originally told in a poem. It ended with these tragic lines:

*Six logs held fast in death's still hand
was proof of human sin.
For they did not die from the cold without,
they died from the cold within.*

(This poem is attributed to Rev. Siegfried S. Johnson by Fr. Tony Kadavil on the Vatican Radio homily site for Nov 11, 2012)

The world of coldness, and darkness and hatred is the world that Advent calls us to change. We have to begin with ourselves. We have to surrender any lingering hatred we may have towards anyone. Maybe it's that person who really hurt us. A former boyfriend or girlfriend. A former husband or wife. A child who now as an adult has estranged himself or herself from our family for reasons we may never know. Or maybe it's that person at work, at school, or in the neighborhood who tried to ruin the life of someone we love. Maybe we have a hidden prejudice against a group of people: gays, or blacks, or straights or whites. As long as we allow the hate to remain within us, we are freezing ourselves to death. We have to fight off the cold and darkness with the warmth of God's love and the light of His life. We need to do this for others as well as ourselves. We cannot allow past hurts and present prejudices to

destroy our opportunity to bring light to those in darkness. We must allow God's love to flow through us.

This is the work of the Christian. This is the work of Advent. This is how we prepare the way for the Lord.

Again, *St. Paul to the Thessalonians* in today's second reading:

Brothers and sisters:

*May the Lord make you increase and abound in love
for one another and for all, just as we have for you,
so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and
Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. Amen.*