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“The Hope that is Advent”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

First Sunday of Advent (Year B)

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Isaiah 64:1–9; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 13:24–37

Happy Thanksgiving! I hope all of you had a joyous, wonderful gathering of your family and friends around a table of abundance to celebrate our national holiday. I love this holiday because it reinforces for all of us, as Christian people, the heart of the Christian mystery: to give thanks. We give thanks in the midst of some dark days around our world, our nation, our city. Despite the challenges of Ferguson, Missouri; of ISIS; of Ebola; of poverty and suffering in our own community; we still stop for a moment around the abundance of God’s many gifts to us, and we give thanks.

As you know, the establishment of this holiday by Abraham Lincoln occurred in the midst of our darkest hour as a nation during the Civil War when he called upon the Union to give thanks despite the challenges that the nation faced in being disrupted and dissolved.

So we give thanks.

I believe, as we move from the Thanksgiving holiday to the very first Sunday of Advent, we are all about Advent as a time of hope. We change colors, we light a candle on an evergreen wreath that is a sign of hope, growth, and new life; we listen to different music, and we focus on the coming of the Christ and the fullness of God’s kingdom. Advent is a time of real hope.

You will notice that the Scriptures you've just heard do not mention the birth of the Christ. There is no Christmas reference at all. The focus of this particular Sunday is a bridge between the Sundays of the last liturgical year and the beginning of this. The focus is on the coming of the Christ another time, at the end of time, at the end of history, when the fullness of God's kingdom will be realized and fulfilled. Let us allow that horizon out there to impel us to live and to recognize the Christ in the many ways in which he has come down to us in our lives today.

The readings from the First Sunday of Advent place Christian hope in a larger context. I would like to speak briefly to two of the three readings we've just heard: the first from the great poet, Isaiah, and the second from the Gospel text, especially about the necessity for watchfulness.

The context for this wonderful series of verses from Chapter 64 of Isaiah is when the Israelites were returning from exile. It was a joyous moment. They were finally returning back to Jerusalem after so many years of being in exile. This became for them a new exodus. When they got to Jerusalem, they began to live a life that was completely opposite the way they thought; things didn't turn out the way in which they thought they would. So Isaiah calls on God in a very abrupt and demanding way: "Oh, God, that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence!" He goes on to say, "When you did awesome deeds like theophanies and splitting the Red Sea and burning bushes and destroying all the enemies before you, you came down the mountains! You came down, and they quaked at your presence!"

He goes on to explain, "Maybe it's because we became so sinful, and we transgressed the basic moral laws of your commandments; maybe it's because we were unclean and not religiously observant. Maybe it's your fault because you hid from us!"

Then Isaiah begins to admit as he continues his prayer that we all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. "There is no one who calls on your name or attempts to take hold of you."

As he moves into this level of pessimism and frustration about the way in which

his people have failed to be faithful to God, Walter Brueggemann, commentator on Isaiah, speaks about how the prayer ends with a mighty “YET.” “Yet, O Lord, you are our father. You are our potter. And we are the work of your hands.” Isaiah’s hope in God is stronger, greater, mightier than his frustration and his pessimism. The prayer ends with his plea that God not be exceedingly angry, that God not remember the iniquity of his people, and that he should realize that we are all your people as you are all our God.

Isaiah calls on God to break through the barriers of distance, whatever they might be, and come down. This is a classic cry of hope. “Come down.” And for the Christian, there is no better realization of the coming down of God except in the flesh in the fulfillment of this text through the eyes of the Christian in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We believe that this cry of hope is fulfilled in the person of Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

If the context for the First Sunday of Advent is all about the Second Coming of the Christ and the Fullness of the Kingdom, we have Chapter 13 of Mark’s gospel that sets the tone for all the literature around the Apocalypse. The context for this whole chapter is hope for the coming of God’s kingdom in its fullness, in its completeness, in its being finished. Let me focus on the end of this particular chapter about watchfulness.

If the hope for the full coming of God’s kingdom is rooted in watchfulness, we listen to Mark say that we don’t know the day or the hour, but at the beginning of this little conclusion in the middle and at the end, it’s constantly punctuated with the imperative to be aware, to keep awake, to be alert, to be on the watch, over and over again. What I say to you, I say to all: keep awake. Stay at attention so that you’re able to recognize, in the course of your everyday lives, whatever disguise the presence of the Lord is in our world because of our conviction of his coming again, it impels us and gives us the ability to see now the many ways in which Christ Jesus has come to us as his people.

Waiting in hope, patiently, sometimes with great difficulty and ambiguity, is the

prayer that he ends this particular text, and the way which we are to face the fullness of the kingdom.

Monika Hellwig, in a reflection on Advent, had these words to say: “Advent is most obviously a time of preparation to celebrate properly an event of the past, the coming down of God in the flesh of our humanity, but the Scriptures of this first Sunday keep nudging us into the fuller sense of the meaning of Advent. Only if we have a vision of the end and destiny of the world can we focus our activity on the Word appropriately. If we do not keep the vision of the end and destiny in focus, we are apt to miss all the intermediate comings in our lives and history. Christian life and history is full of stories of the comings of the Christ in disguise.”

So I invite you this holy season of Advent, as we allow the second coming of Christ, to nudge us into that broader context of knowing that full reality is somewhere out there in God’s good future, but yet allow it to be for us the aim and the goal of the way in which we envision the Christ to come among us now. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Advent, more than any other time, Monika goes on to say, tries to set this focus by reminding us of the promises and reminding us that God keeps faith with us in sending Christ the Savior, our ultimate Christian hope.

Happy Advent.

Reference: Monika Hellwig