



FIRST LESSON

JEREMIAH 33:14-16

PSALM

PSALM 25:1-9

(NRSV: PSALM 25:1-10)

SECOND LESSON

1 THESSALONIANS 3:9-13

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 21:25-36

PRAYER OF THE DAY

STIR UP YOUR POWER, O LORD, AND COME. PROTECT US BY YOUR STRENGTH AND SAVE US FROM THE THREATENING DANGERS OF OUR SINS, FOR YOU LIVE AND REIGN WITH THE FATHER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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Liturgical Day: The First Sunday in Advent

Date: December 3, 2006

Sermon Title: The Season of Advent

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It has begun, hasn't it? We have finished all the leftover turkey from Thanksgiving dinner. The Christmas lights are up on many of our houses. Some Christmas presents have been purchased, and others are in process. The recycle bin is already filled to the brim with Christmas shopping advertisements – my wife even saw one last week that said: "Come in now for a last-minute Christmas shopping discount." Pictures have been selected and many are already printed for the annual Christmas letter. Invitations have been extended and accepted for holiday parties and open houses. The snow on the ground and the cold air add to the ambiance.

Even here at Saint Peter, we've enjoyed "Beyond Scrooge" – a new play that extends the story line of Charles Dickens' familiar "A Christmas Carol." We've begun listening to Saint Peter's 24-hour Christmas Channel. And we're encouraging you all to get signs in your front yards that promote Christmas worship at Saint Peter.

Without a doubt, the march towards Christmas Day has begun, and there's no turning back now.

What a great time of year! A sacred time of year, really. But there is a danger, of course. There is a danger that this "Holy Time" can turn into "Hollow Time."

A Pastor tells the story of a Christmas card he received last year. It came to him from a friend across the miles. Inside the card were the words from Hallmark: "Got lots of happiness to share this Christmas!" Underneath these words were scrawled the words in a personal greeting: "Sending love and prayers for the hollowdays." ⁱ

The dictionary defines "hollow" as without substance, worth or character... a cavity, hole or space, a void. I know now, after hearing people's stores for some twenty years, that the Christmas season can be just that for many people: a hollow time.

- You and I live in a society that spends an incredible amount of time and energy racing around – running from commitment to commitment – too busy for our own good. A friend of mine refers to us as people who are trying to squeeze three lives into one. At Christmas time, with the extra activities and obligations, that dynamic becomes even more pronounced. I once heard someone compare December to a 16-mile marathon, and I know there have been years when it has felt like that to me. The busyness can cause us to experience these weeks as more hollow than holy.
- A second pressure that some feel at this time of year has to do with the "perfect Christmas" syndrome. Stoked by Christmas images from old Norman Rockwell paintings, there is buried in the back of our collective psyche the expectation of perfectly behaved, well-dressed children, spectacularly decorated homes, Christmas trees piled high with gifts, and a Christmas dinner fit for a king. With expectations that have more to do with American culture than Jesus Christ, we find ourselves disappointed if our experience is anything less than these nostalgic and romantic notions. When our reality falls so far short from this fantasy, Christmas can feel more hollow than holy.

ⁱ The "hollowdays" illustration is borrowed from a sermon entitled "Hollow Days", based on 1st Thessalonians 3:9-13, posted on www.homileticonline.com.

- Those of us who are experiencing hard times seem to have an even more difficult time dealing with them at this time of year. My good friend Lee's father-in-law is dying in Chandler, Arizona. Hospice is taking care of him, and his needs are being met. But it is an agonizing time for them, as they watch life slowly slip away from him. When pain is a reality, the merriment of Christmas that surrounds us can make us feel even worse, and my prayers are with him and his family. People struggle in any number of ways, and when that struggle takes place during December, it can make this month feel far more hollow than holy.

There is a solution, however, that I want to commend to you this morning. It is called: *The Season of Advent*.

Advent is the season that encompasses the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day. Between now and the arrival of Christmas Eve, the church has traditionally considered a threefold pattern of waiting and watching that marks the days. It has been more than 800 years since St. Bernard of Clairvoux taught that Advent waiting takes three forms. First off, our waiting is grounded in the past, and the witness of Ancient Israel, who for centuries waited in anticipation of the coming Christ – the promised Messiah. Second, our waiting is grounded in the present, and the fellowship we share with Christians throughout the world as we prepare ourselves for the arrival of December 25th and the celebration of Christ's birth among us. Third, our waiting is grounded in the future, as all of creation longs for the promised return of Jesus at the completion of all time.

That third aspect of waiting is the focus of this morning's Gospel lesson. Set towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, this section from Luke 21 gives us a glimpse of how Jesus taught his followers about the eventual end of this world. Jesus said that there would be startling signs in the heavens, fear rippling through populations, and the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now I know that there have been times when those words were great comfort to believers. In times when it has been dangerous to voice belief in Jesus – in times when one could expect to be persecuted because of the faith – in times when the whole world seems dead set against what God is up to in Jesus Christ – in those kinds of times, words about God's victory at the end are welcome words. Words of hope. Words that allow a believer to stay faithful, even in the midst of all the opposition this world can offer up.

They are words of hope for us today – even in an environment that is as comfortable and as enjoyable as ours. We live in a time of unprecedented luxury. But it is also a time in which many of our friends and neighbors are searching for meaning. And truth be told: some of us are in that position too. What Advent teaches us is that great meaning is to be found in a life that is lived with the knowledge that Jesus promised to return.

In this morning's lesson, Jesus says:

- be on guard
- do not let your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life
- do not let the coming day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap
- be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape

That is how the people of the first century lived. Those who lived in the first generation or so of Christian faith lived with the expectation that Jesus would return before some of them died. Consequently, they lived, paying careful attention to their faith and their relationship with God. They believed that Christ could return at any time, and so they were constantly prepared for that possibility. If Jesus returned, they didn't want to be found drifting from God – but wanted to be at the heart of the promise, with a strong faith. Jesus didn't come again, of course, in their lifetime. But because of their careful attention to faith and faithfulness, their lives were enriched immeasurably. They lived a much richer and more meaningful life.

This third aspect of Advent preparation could be a great blessing to us today – and give our lives greater meaning and purpose. If we believed it to be possible that Christ might return during our lifetimes, we too could find ourselves taking our faith much more seriously. We too could live with a constant awareness of our faith and our relationship with God. We too could draw nearer to God, and deeper into the promise of the Gospel. And it could make all the difference in the world. We enter into this third aspect of Advent waiting and

watching, not to scare or frighten about the end of all time, but to help us discover what it means to live with the spirit of anticipation that the first generation of Christian believers had.

This Advent, I hope you will join us in remembering how God's people waited for years, longing for the arrival of the Messiah. I hope you will join us in preparing your hearts and homes, that Christ might find a place at the center of them. Most of all, I hope you will take these words of Christ's return to heart, and allow them to create for you the expectation that he might come within our lifetime, and the motivation to give your faith a central position in your life. Whether or not Christ returns on our watch, I can guarantee you: it will be worth every bit of effort it takes. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 3, 2006)

English Text: ⁱⁱ

²⁵ "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." ²⁹ Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴ "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ 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." ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

²⁵ Καὶ ἔσονται σημεῖα ἐν ἡλίῳ καὶ σελήνῃ καὶ ἀστροῖς, καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς συνοχὴ ἔθνων ἐν ἀπορίᾳ ἤχους θαλάσσης καὶ σάλου, ²⁶ ἀποψυχόντων ἀνθρώπων ἀπὸ φόβου καὶ προσδοκίας τῶν ἐπερχομένων τῇ οἰκουμένῃ, αἱ γὰρ δυνάμεις τῶν οὐρανῶν σαλευθήσονται. ²⁷ καὶ τότε ὄψονται τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐρχόμενον ἐν νεφέλῃ μετὰ δυνάμεως καὶ δόξης πολλῆς. ²⁸ ἀρχομένων δὲ τούτων γίνεσθαι ἀνακύψατε καὶ ἐπάρατε τὰς κεφαλὰς ὑμῶν, διότι ἐγγίζει ἡ ἀπολύτρωσις ὑμῶν. ²⁹ Καὶ εἶπεν παραβολὴν αὐτοῖς· ἴδετε τὴν συκὴν καὶ πάντα τὰ δένδρα· ³⁰ ὅταν προβάλωσιν ἤδη, βλέποντες ἀφ' ἑαυτῶν γινώσκετε ὅτι ἤδη ἐγγὺς τὸ θέρος ἐστίν· ³¹ οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὅταν ἴδητε ταῦτα γινόμενα, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγὺς ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. ³² ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται. ³³ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ παρελεύσονται, οἱ δὲ λόγοι μου οὐ μὴ παρελεύσονται. ³⁴ Προσέχετε δὲ ἑαυτοῖς μήποτε βαρηθῶσιν ὑμῶν αἱ καρδίαι ἐν κραιπάλῃ καὶ μέθῃ καὶ μερίμναις βιωτικαῖς καὶ ἐπιστῇ ἐφ' ὑμᾶς αἰφνίδιος ἡ ἡμέρα ἐκείνη ³⁵ ὡς παγίς· ἐπισελεύσεται γὰρ ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς καθημένους ἐπὶ πρόσωπον πάσης τῆς γῆς. ³⁶ ἀγρυπνεῖτε δὲ ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ δεόμενοι ἵνα κατισχύσητε ἐκφυγεῖν ταῦτα πάντα τὰ μέλλοντα γίνεσθαι καὶ σταθῆναι ἐμπροσθεν τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. ^{iv}

ⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 21:25-36, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. Luke 21:25-36, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).