

Sermon | The First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5 | Romans 13:11-14 | Matthew 24:36-44

The Rev. Barnabas Pusunur | Nov 27, 2022

A very happy new year! Today, the first Sunday of Advent, we start the new year of our church's liturgical calendar. A new year is a new beginning. A fresh start. A start filled with hope and excitement. Let's welcome this new year. If you are able, do something celebratory today. Even if it is something small, remind yourself that a new year has dawned in your life. A fresh start is also a chance to pause, re-start, and work towards a better way of living and doing things. So today, I would encourage you not only to do something to celebrate, but also to take some time to pause and think how best to enter this new liturgical year.

A new beginning is much like the new day that dawns every morning. We get a fresh batch of 24 hours. We wake up from our sleep and get ready to live a new day. To our morning question "what time is it?", Paul in today's reading replies, it is time to wake up from sleep and get ready. The night is gone, the day is upon us. Paul tells the Christians in Rome, wake up, and change your clothes for this new day. Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Remove the clothes that belonged to the night and put on yourselves the clothes of light. Further in the reading Paul says, 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Pause with me to think, what does it mean to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, this armor of light. The imagery of armor reminds of the need of safety and protection. Maybe clothing oneself with Christ is the protection we need as we face the challenges of the new year. Paul says, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." In Paul's theology 'the flesh' does not mean our physical body, but is symbolic of the worst in human nature, symbolic of everything that is morally corrupt in us. Our selfishness, our envy, our unfaithfulness, our hatred,

and everything that is life denying rather than life affirming. Paul tells us do not gratify the desires of the promptings of the worst in you. Rather clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ. As we enter this Advent season, let's prepare ourselves to wake up and get ready. Let's put on the armor of light.

There is another metaphor around light in today's reading. The prophet Isaiah says "Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD." Putting on the light, and now walking in the light of God. To walk in the light of God is to go about in the right direction, in the way of life, in the way of God. The opposite of walking in the light of God, would be to stumble in darkness and lose the way. From Isaiah, it seems this walking in the light needs constant learning. The prophet talks about a day when people will say "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." What place is better to learn this walking in the light of God, than in the presence of God and in the fellowship of fellow learners.

To what end is this learning to walk in the light? It is a hope-filled journey to a world, where the worst in human nature is transformed to the best that we can be. On that day, the prophet says: "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." The worst will be transformed to the best and to all our lingering conflicts in this world God will bring about judgement, arbitration, and reconciliation. God will open to us a new way forward. As we enter this Advent season, let's walk in the light of God, let's walk with the hope of a transformed world.

The invitations: 'Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord', 'Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord', remind me of another coming. While we come into the presence of God, Advent is the season which reminds us of God coming to us. Advent comes from the Latin word, meaning 'coming'. It's a season in which we await the coming of our Lord Jesus to us. God comes to us. God came to us in Jesus, about 2000 years ago in the Middle East. We remember this coming, the birth of Jesus, every Christmas, and Advent is the preparation for this celebration of the coming of Christ to us. But the scriptures also say that God comes again in Jesus at the final consummation of the world. Often referred to as the second coming, this Advent season is also a reminder of that final coming of God to us.

This coming again is not simply a minor accessory to our faith. To the first Christians, who were a minority and were being persecuted in different places of the Roman Empire, the coming again of Jesus was their ultimate hope. They were standing firm in their faith looking earnestly to the salvation that was promised in the final coming of Jesus to them. Either their death and martyrdom would bring an end to their pain and persecution or the coming again of God would bring about the deliverance they longed for. They had seen Jesus ascending after his resurrection, and they believed he would come back again to set the world right.

However, we see in the New Testament that within the first few centuries, people began to lose hope in his coming. This was accompanied by a serious consideration that the way of Jesus was not worth the trouble. The way of love was simply too hard. It's the same dilemma that we sometimes go through. Is the love commanded by Jesus worth the effort if God doesn't ultimately come and set things right. Our

actions of love are simply too small, too weak, and too limited, to make any lasting change. And therefore, if God isn't going to come and set things right, what's the point.

Today's Gospel, reminds us to hold on to the hope that our God will come and make things whole.

Unfortunately, we simply cannot and will not know when this will happen. The Gospel says, God might come in the most unexpected hour. While I dare not speculate about this final coming, I have seen glimpses of God showing up in my life in the least expected of times. I remember during my graduate studies in a seminary in India, living with Padma and my months old daughter Khushi, we were struggling financially. One fine day I got a call from a person who was not my family, not my friend, but simply an acquaintance at a church I had been in thousands of miles away from where I was. I had not been in touch with this person for about two years. He called me and told me that he wanted to send some money to me. Why? I don't know. But God did show up in the least expected way and time.

The Gospel today, reminds us to just be ready all the time. He uses the same metaphor as Paul. Do not be asleep. Be awake, be ready, for God will come. God will come to set things right, through judgment and through salvation. All that is expected from us is that we keep walking in the light and love of God.

As we enter this Advent season, let us prepare ourselves to be ready and walk with this hope. Let us come to God and let us know that God comes to us. Today is an opportunity to start afresh with this hope. A fresh start to walk closely with our God. Let us celebrate and prepare for this Advent season. A very happy new year!