

THE SEASON OF ADVENT

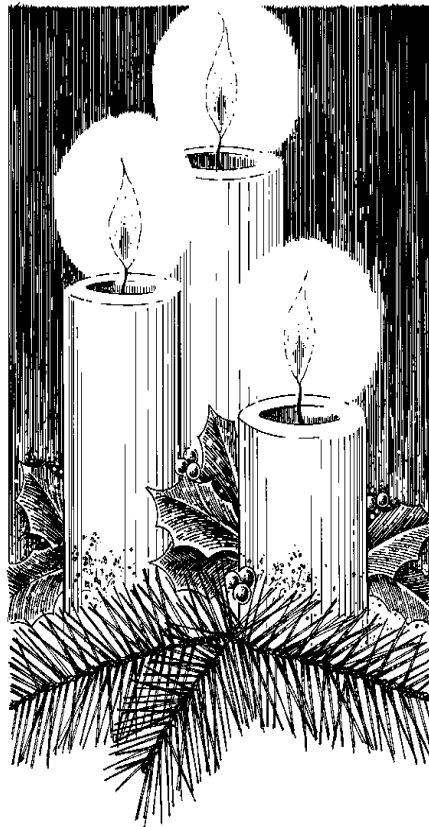
Autumn and early winter are times of great seasonal change. The leaves turn brilliant colors then fade and fall. The shadows lengthen as the days grow shorter and colder. The warmth of summer and vacations seem distant memories and we are reminded once again that the things of this world last but a moment and pass away. Even so, we look forward as well. Christmas can be a wonderful time of year. Likewise, the winter ahead has delights. Few can deny the mesmerizing beauty of falling snow and the child-like excitement a winter storm can cause.

Advent draws us spiritually into this season of change, of longing and of expectation. As the days grow shorter and the darkness increases we light candles on our Advent wreaths and remember that Jesus is the true light of the world, the light that shines in the darkness. These lit candles also symbolize our on-going commitment to come out of darkness into God's own marvelous light. (cf 1 Peter 2:9). And so we sing, *Walk in the light, beautiful light, come where the dew-drops of mercy shine bright.*

Longing for Salvation

Advent also draws us back to our Old Testament roots. Israel was taught by God through the prophets to expect a Messiah from God who would set them free from sin and injustice. Across many centuries there arose a longing and a yearning for this messiah. Sin and injustice had taken a terrible toll and so the cry from Israel went up: *O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at thy presence--as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil...We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We*

all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one that calls upon thy name, that bestirs himself to take hold of thee; for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast delivered us into the hand of our iniquities. Yet, O LORD, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand. Be not exceedingly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity for ever. Behold, consider, we are all thy people. (Is 64:1-7)



In Advent we recall these cries of ancient Israel and make them our own. Surely Christ has already come yet we know that sin and injustice still have their terrible effects in our lives and in our communities. We very much need Jesus to be our Savior and to daily set us free. Advent is a time to acknowledge our need for the saving work of God and to long for the

glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that God has already begun this saving work in us, now we long for him to bring it to completion. We also await the full manifestation of his glory and this brings us to the second important meaning of Advent. .

Waiting - His Second Coming

Advent is also a time to prepare for the second coming of the Lord. We say in the Creed, *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.* This truth flows directly from Scripture which teaches clearly two things on which we must reflect. First, He will come again in glory. Second we cannot know the day or the hour that he will return. In fact, though some signs will precede his coming, the emphasis of Scripture falls upon the suddenness of the event. He will appear like lightning (Mt 24:27), with the suddenness of the pangs of child birth (1 Th. 5:3) in the twinkling of an eye and the sound of a trumpet (1 Cor 15:52). It will take place when we least expect (Mt 24:44), just when everyone is saying, "There is peace and security!" (1 Th. 5:3).

Since this is to be the case we must live lives of readiness for that day. Advent is a time when we especially reflect of the necessity of our readiness. And so we sing: *Ready!? Are you ready? For the coming of the Lord?* Likewise, another song counsels, *Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. The time is drawing nigh!*

Be not afraid

Some of the images of the last day, images of judgement and destruction, can seem very frightening indeed. Consider for example this passage from the Second Letter of Peter: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass*

away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace (2 Pt. 3:10-14). Some of the imagery used here reminds us of the even more fearsome images of the Book of Revelation! But notice the complete message of this passage and others like it. The heavens and the earth as we know it will pass away but we who are ready look forward with joy to a "new heavens and a new earth" where the justice of God will reside in all its fullness.

The fire next time

An African-American Spiritual summarized the teachings of the Second Letter of Peter by these classic lines, *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time.* Here too, our first reaction to such phrases might be fear. But in the tradition of the spirituals, this fire was a fire of justice and truth that destroyed the power of injustice and oppression. Another spiritual expresses this, *God's gonna set this world on fire, one of these days Alleluia! [and] I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days Alleluia!* For the slaves, the Day of God's visitation could only be a day of jubilee, a day of vindication and deliverance. And so it will be for us if we are ready. But what does it mean to be ready? To be ready is to be living faithfully, holding to God's unchanging hand in the obedience of

faith and trust. To be ready is to be living a holy life and a life of repentance. If we do this we have not only have nothing to fear about the Last Day, we eagerly anticipate it and cry out, "Amen, Come Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

The Great and Terrible Day of the Lord

Another way to understand the Last Day is to examine the Old Testament which referred to the day of God's visitation as "the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord." (e.g. Joel 2:31; Mal 4:5). This phrase showed the twofold experience of an encounter with the Lord of glory. That day, would be a great day of vindication and joy for the just. But for the unjust and unrepentant sinners, it would be a day of wrath and destruction. Consider this passage from the very end of the Old Testament as an illustration: *For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel...(Malachi 4:1-4)*

Remember, Repent, Rehearse

All these reflections help to place Advent in proper perspective for us. We are called to remember, repent and rehearse. We remember that Christ has already come and that he has called us to the obedience of faith and promised he will return in glory. We repent of whatever hinders our readiness for that day. And we rehearse for his

second coming in glory by anticipating its demands and celebrating the glory that comes to those whom he finds watchful and ready. In a sense every Mass is a dress rehearsal for the glory of the kingdom. At every mass the following prayer is said, *Deliver us Lord from every evil and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy, keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our savior, Jesus Christ.* This beautiful prayer recalls that it is entirely God's work that we be ready for his glorious return. Only he can deliver us, free us from our sin and remove anxiety about that day. Only he can give us joy and make us holy. We have but to yield to his saving work.

And this brings us back to where we started, longing and yearning for our savior. To yearn for him is to know how much we need him. To long for him is to constantly seek his face and call upon his name. Do not the scriptures teach, *And I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day. And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.* (Acts 2:19-21).

This is a holy season. The world as we know it is passing away. God alone is eternal and unchanging. Therefore cry out with the Church, "Come Lord Jesus!" For it is written, *The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let him who hears say, "Come." And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price... He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!* (Rev 22:17, 20)