

Advent Already!

Jamaica Plain, November 28, 2004, Rev. Terry Burke

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, traditionally a time to watch and spiritually prepare for the Christmas holiday. Advent has the same liturgical color, purple, as Lent, the time of preparing and going deeper for Easter. Advent is a time to look at our own spiritual life and the lives of people around us, and their needs. This is a good time to try meditating for a few minutes a day, or remembering loved ones in prayer, or stopping by our Wednesday night prayer group. In our family we buy Advent calendars for the children. Each evening they lift up flaps of the paper calendars to mark the passage of another day, revealing pictures of toys or shepherds or Bible verses as they watch and wait for Christmas.

Instead of a time to deepen spiritually and wait, for most of us, Advent and the weeks before December 25th are a time of exhausting frenzy. It's the season of SHOPPING - did so-and-so give me a present last year? How expensive a present did x give me in the past? How many reserve presents should I stock up on? Can I regift this book? This is the Sunday that I remind us of the excellent Christmas pledge from Unplug the Christmas Machine. Let's say it together; it's printed on your order of service cover...

Believing in the beauty and simplicity of Christmas, I commit myself to the following:

1. To remember those people who truly need my gifts.
2. To express my love for family and friends in more direct ways than presents.
3. To rededicate myself to the spiritual growth of my family.
4. To examine my holiday activities in light of the true spirit of Christmas.
5. To initiate one act of peacemaking within my circle of family and friends.

As I also mention every year, you don't have to kill yourself through endless frenetic activity in trying to get everything done by December 25th. Traditionally there are 12

days of Christmas, starting December 25th, (remember the carol) 12 days in which to sing carols, go to parties, give gifts, spend time with family and friends, and make music.

While eating a delicious cheesecake following Peter Sykes recent organ recital at our church, a man walked up to me and said, "That was better than the Second Coming!" He was referring to the organ music. I looked at today's Bible readings of the Revised Standard Lectionary (my UU colleague in Chestnut Hill, Joe Bassett helped create the Revised Standard Lectionary) and instead of dealing with the birth of Jesus, they talk about the Second Coming. This week's readings for the first Sunday in Advent include Matthew 24:36-44, in which Jesus speaks about the coming End Time and the need to stay awake and watch. In the early church, people thought that the End Time and the Second Coming of Jesus, with the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God that he preached about, would happen any day. The Gospel of John mentions the tradition that the Second Coming would happen before John, the beloved disciple, died. The apocalyptic Second Coming didn't happen, though that doesn't keep writings on the End Time like the "Left Behind" books from selling millions of copies (I recently noticed that a liberal Catholic friend was reading one of those books and asked her what she thought about their theology - she replied, "I don't pay attention to the theology, they're a good read.")

One of my seminary teachers on the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul Hanson, made an important distinction between apocalyptic and prophetic writings. In the Biblical writings of the prophets, people like Isaiah and Amos and Micah, God speaks to individuals and society through human messengers. In the prophetic world view, there is still a hope, however small, that people and the political/cultural situation can change. Maybe the rich will stop "selling the poor for a pair of shoes." In the apocalyptic world view, such as in the Book of Revelation which was written during a time of intense persecution, there is no hope left in any change taking place. People are stuck in a hopeless world of despair, of gulags and concentration camps. The only way out, other than death, is for God to intervene directly in history.

People have speculated for centuries what form the apocalyptic Second Coming could take. More recently, some have suggested a female Messiah, or a Christ from the Third World. The great 20th century Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote his poem "The Second Coming" in the years of build-up to the horrors of the Second World War. His words seem to speak to our time, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold." We seem about to be drowned by the "blood dimmed tide," and "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity." In the second stanza of the poem, Yeats writes of his vision of the Second Coming. He dreams of an archaic, sphinx-like beast, half lion and human, "slouching toward Bethlehem." The reign of such a "rough beast" and its barbaric world seems beyond our imagining

In our second reading today on the Second Coming, we heard from the Russian poet Alexandr Blok's poem "The Twelve." Blok was a symbolist poet who wrote on the Divine Feminine, Sophia, in his early poetry. He traveled to his family estate after the 1917 Russian Revolution to find it looted, burned and destroyed. Heading back to St. Petersburg with a piece of mirror he had salvaged from his former home, he was stopped by Red partisans, who made him hold the mirror for them while each one shaved. Shortly before his death in 1921, Blok spoke out on the need for absolute "freedom of creation" for artists. In his poem "The Twelve," twelve Red soldiers loot and kill in the name of the Revolution during the first winter after the Red coup. The guns of the soldiers shine with intense light as if they are instruments of divine justice. The twelve, reminiscent of the twelve apostles, try unsuccessfully to shoot the mysterious figure walking in front of them. Holding the red flag, Jesus goes before the twelve.

Reading what Jesus says about the End Time in Matthew's Gospel, people have long wondered, 'when will it happen?' Within the lifetime of the 12 apostles? At the millennium of the year 1000? At Y2K? When will there be an end of time and a beginning of God's reign of justice? To the question of the Advent text, when will there be a Second Coming, when a rebirth for us to stay awake and watch for, we get a nonsensical answer - Christmas. Like a Zen paradox, the question of End Time divine justice is answered by a birth story of a mother and child. For all of its materialism and

cynicism, Christmas retains a holy element of caring, compassion, remembrance of the poor, and wonder. During our Advent frenzy, may we ponder the way in which the question of when will there be an end time of justice is answered by a silent night of peace. May we slow down from all the busyness this Advent. May we take some time to go deeper in the silence.

Reading:

From The Twelve, by Aleksandr Blok

...The wind roams free, the snowflakes flutter;
Twelve men are marching in the gutter.

Their rifle-straps are black, yet glow:
They shall have lights where'er they go!

Their caps are crumpled; they smoke, they gripe:
By rights their backs should bear the convict's stripe!

Liberty, Liberty -
Eh, eh, no crosses on 'em hang!

Bang-bang-bang!

...They march on with sovereign thread...
"Who's that now? Come on out!"
'Tis the wind, far off ahead,
Trying the red flag to rout...

"That red flag-who waves it so?"

"It's so dark-can't see at all!"

"Who's that running? See him go,
Hiding behind every wall?"

"It's no use; come on out, friend -
I will get you, live or dead!"
"You'll fare poorly in the end,
For we'll fill you full of lead!"

Bang-bang-bang! And echo only
Mid the houses loudly rang,
While the blizzard, laughing snowily,
Pealed and shrieked and howled and sang,

Bang-bang-bang!
Bang-bang-bang...

... Thus they their sovereign march pursue;
Behind them skulks the hound half-dead;
Ahead (with a flag of sanguine hue)-
Invisible within the storm,
Immune from any bullet's harm,
Walking with laden step and gentle
In snowy, pearl-strewn mantle,

With small, white roses garlanded-
Jesus the Christ walks at their head.