

Sermon



First Sunday of Advent

November 29, 2009

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Phone calls in the middle of the night. You are abruptly jarred from sleep, wondering if it is a dream or the real thing. Phone calls in the middle of the night summon us to wake up quickly. My mind always races. Is something wrong in my family? Is there an emergency for one of our parishioners? Sometimes it is just a wrong number.

Fortunately my wife, Pam, helps me come around to consciousness. Like the night there was a loud knock at our front door early in the morning. Pam had already been awake listening to the helicopter overhead. I heard the knock, but it was her voice that summoned me to action: “Randy, it’s the police at the front door.” The first person I thought about was my son, Tim, a high school senior at the time. He had been out late, so I went racing to the door, grabbing clothes as I ran. I opened the door and dashed out into the night relieved to see his car safely in the driveway. Then I heard the sheriff’s deputy speaking to me, saying someone had broken into Tim’s car and that’s why they were there. The deputy had a very calm voice, and I sensed he was a man who dealt with lots of chaos in the middle of the night. With the same voice, he said to me, “Sir, everything is okay. Put on your pants and we’ll talk.”

Phone calls in the middle of the night or a loud knock at the door. That’s the way Advent breaks into our lives, calling us to wake up and be alert. It calls to us right here this morning, in between black Friday and cyber Monday. Just when you were listening to Christmas carols playing in the stores and making plans for holiday parties, you hear the voice of the prophet Zechariah announcing, “the day of the Lord,” and hear the Gospel according to Luke saying, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars and on the earth distress among nations...”

Two weeks ago our gospel passage from Mark portrayed the chaos in Jerusalem as it was destroyed by Roman armies around the year 70 A.D. Christians and Jews living in Jerusalem fled for their lives as the city and the temple were destroyed. Two powerful responses emerged in the fledgling church. First, the gospels circulated in written form in the closing decades of the first century. Secondly, there was a fervent hope among Christians that our Lord would return from the heavens in the midst of the turmoil to bring his faithful people victory over the powers of darkness. They longed for his return and prayed fervently that he would come quickly.

Today we hear Luke's understanding of these events coming ten to fifteen years later than Mark's gospel. Luke's gospel says, "Now when you see these things begin to take place, **stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**" Luke strives to inspire and reassure a frightened community. If you look at Christian art at the end of the first century, you will see the same thing. Often Old Testament images of victory are portrayed, like Daniel in the lion's den, Jonah emerging from the mouth of the whale and the three young men dancing in the flames of the furnace.

Advent provides a four week period for us to contemplate the mysteries of the coming of our Lord. First, we prepare for the birth of our Lord as it took place in Bethlehem of Judea many centuries ago. During Advent we will hear the voice of the prophets who lived when Jesus was born, like John the Baptist. Second, we explore the meaning of our Lord coming into our lives, for he comes to us again and again seeking our deeper commitment and our deeper devotion. Third, we contemplate the second coming of Christ at the end of time.

During these coming weeks, let us engage in prayer and the study of scripture. Let us commit ourselves to ministry, reaching out to help others. Here is my interpretation. When things get rough, chaotic, and unpredictable, we need these spiritual disciplines in order to put on the armor of light! When we engage in prayer, study and ministry, we may indeed stand up and raise our heads with confidence during turbulent times!

During this holiday season there will be many organizations doing good things. Clubs and civic associations will give us ample opportunity to raise a toast to the holidays. However the preparation to greet our Lord...to stand up, look to the east and raise our heads - that is the work of the church!