

Advent 1

Year B

He's coming!

Who?

Him.

Whom?

God!

When?

Very, very soon.

I had a professor at Divinity school who taught a class on, basically, the history of Christian anti-Semitism from antiquity to the present. Tough stuff. He is an Orthodox rabbi and a respected medievalist. He told us in this class that he had never “gotten” Christianity, from the perspective of an historian. He didn't buy it. There was a messianic figure who was executed, reappeared several times, then ascended into heaven. That is no problem, there are a million stories like this from that time. The thing is, the people, the believers, had faith that this messiah would return. It was immanent, so they waited. And they waited. And they waited. And we are still waiting

for Him to return. The technical term for this waiting is the parousia, and we are still in it.

As an historian, he did not buy the idea that true expectation of a return could possibly last. Maybe a generation or two; that gets us through the epistles and most of the gospels, but, he believed, a people could not REALLY keep waiting for a real event to occur decade after decade, century after century.

Then, the Lubavitch Rebbe happened. There is a messianic strain of Hasidism called Chabad or Lubavitch, and in 1994, the head rabbi died, and in death, took on the airs of the messiah. His return is immanent. Any day now. And they wait. For fourteen years now, they have waited with no signs of letting up. And this professor, an outspoken critic of the Chabad movement sat there and told us, “I did not believe those stories of old that people would wait. But here we are, and they are waiting in Brooklyn. I’ve got to reconsider some things.”

We are an incarnational people, we Anglicans. Scripture promises, our tradition tells us, and for many our experience confirms, that God, the full

God, is alive in all of this. In this space, in the space between space, in this wood, in energy flowing, wind blowing, in words shared, love made, birds singing, in children breathing and sleeping and laughing and crying, in seasons changing, in time passing second by second, hour by hour; God is alive in all of this, and all of this, is good. Not in the hate and the violence and small minded-pettiness that all of us carry, that is of the world, God is **in** the world. An incarnational people sees God, maybe as the creative love and life forces, the ground of being, the YHWH, the I-am-that-I-am the force that through the green fuse drives the flowers kind of energy that tells us that this was made and this is good. That is an incarnational world view.

But we take this a step further. It is Advent. A time of preparation and waiting, the Latin root is a bit more proactive, meaning “coming”.

Preparing, waiting for the coming of Christ. Advent is the celebration of the Nativity of Christ. We Christians hold onto the stupendous idea that not only is the world a creation of God and is therefore a holy place demanding our respect and veneration, but that God in God’s self entered it, fully, clothed in flesh, born of a woman, walking, laughing, crying, being disappointed and impressed, having friends, loosing them and dying. Advent is specifically a time where we remember the birth of Jesus. A manger,

sheep, wise men, silent nights, holy nights... What a story. What a way to understand the intimacy with which the foundation of existence relates to our personal and communal lives. God became one of us. God, died, was buried, descended to the dead, rose again, then ascended into heaven AND will come again to judge the living and the dead. In glory, no less.

Advent is the time to remember the miracle of new life, of God's new life among us, and it is a time to again consciously prepare for God's coming again. God's reincarnation. The Second Coming. "But about that day or hour, no one knows... Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." We do not exactly know when, but God is coming and it might be tomorrow. Keep awake.

I do not know how that preaches. The second coming, and all. I don't know how I'd feel about coming to church on Advent 1 and hear someone preach on the Second coming, tradition or not. I'd check my GPS and make sure I wasn't in Texas or something. Does anyone feel kind of uncomfortable with that? I sort of do. It doesn't roll off my tongue so easy as "peace on earth, good will to all", or "turn the other cheek," "blessed are the meek." But there is Jesus in Mark's account, "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will

not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken... Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

In the liberal churches, we do not talk much about the second coming. It is not very reasonable. And though it is in the scripture, there is a lot we take and leave in scripture, but we ignore the Second Coming at our peril. Not because we will be caught unawares like the man who puts his watchman on the door, not because God is an angry God looking to cast us judgementally into eternal hell fires for not being ready, I can say definitively that no one will be cast into any fires by God, but we ignore the dream of the second coming at our peril because when we do we miss out on the vast, mysterious hope, the patience, the waiting that our ancestors held dear to their hearts, as central to their experience of God. God is coming, maybe tomorrow. Many believed this as much as we believe that the sun will rise again tomorrow.

Maybe it is tomfoolery, to live with the expectation that the fulfillment of the ages will happen at any time, it certainly can lead us to behave like fools, to be Aesop's grasshopper and not the ant as the summer wanes. But maybe it is the foolishness of Paul, to “become wise we must become fools” (I Cor.

3:18), or “we are fools for the sake of Christ” (I Cor 4:10) God came, making a covenant to open all the world to Truth, then left with the promise to return on God’s lips to fulfill this covenant. If we lived as if this were true, that at any instant the great reconciling moment of creation, the Omega of right relationship, the fulfillment of God’s embodied promise to everything, if we lived as if we believed this, knew this, would risk our life on this knowledge... what a wonderful world this would be.

Debt? None, for we’d forgive our debts as God promises to forgive ours.

Hunger? Disappeared, for there is plenty for all if we just stop hoarding.

Violence? Hitting, hating, grudging... Why would we be mired in that filth?

This is not some pie in the sky idealism, if we really kept awake, knowing that this Now very well, if not probably will be the last Now we experience, we’d be transformed. We’d be saved, saved from the muck we find ourselves in, worries and stresses and wishing for outcomes over which we have no control or that we decided upon in our past. We would know what Isaiah knew 27 centuries ago, that “we are the clay, and you are our potter, we are all the work of your hand.”

Thanks be to God that we have for our use about the earliest form of Christian practice to guide our feet towards knowing that the covenant will be fulfilled, that world will find itself in equilibrium, in right and balanced relationship. It's the Advent practice. The practice of Holy waiting. Entering the parousia, taking the mantle of being an incarnational church seriously and taking the season of Advent to be a critical time of practice. Try this at home, really, try asking, "What if God were coming back next Tuesday?" What could change in your world? How might you see things different? Ask yourself, "What if God were coming back tomorrow?" How would you spend your afternoon? Ask yourself, "What if God were coming at three?" What would you do about lunch?

Our people have been waiting for a long time. A very long time. Let us not forget what we have been waiting for. Happy Advent. AMEN