

1 Advent, Year B, RCL  
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
December 2, 2023

Isaiah 64:1-9 Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 1 Cor 1:3-9 Mark 13:24-37

In the first parish I served, and in my first Advent as a priest, as a parishioner left the church he greeted me, shook my hand and then exclaimed, “That was awful!” What could I say except “Oh, good, you were listening!”

I love the imagery that Isaiah and Mark give us today, and I realize that my thoughts may be in the minority in that regard. However – I wonder if you, too, can almost see what Isaiah describes, and hear his lament: *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as fire kindles brushwood ...*

Mark’s gospel continues this rich and dire imagery:

*“But in those days, after that suffering, 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. (13.24-25)”*

Then Isaiah turns his lament into awe:

*Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.* We are created, shaped, and held in the hands of one magnificent God who has and who will again tear open the heavens and come to us. In our creation lies our hope: God is our maker! God, who creates, will keep God’s ancient covenant: God will come again.

Chapter 22 in the book of Revelation echoes the description from Mark. In Revelation’s description of the city of God, we read:

*“And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord will be their light...”*

The Lord is our light, our hope in every darkness. There is, and will be, a city of God. We welcome this city even as we wait.

Still, the world is a difficult place; we lament. We know what lies ahead in Jesus’ life; in Mark’s gospel, we are pages away from Jesus’ crucifixion. Before we get to resurrection and new life, terrible things will take place. In today’s parable, Jesus says to keep awake, and to watch, not in hours on a clock, but in a watchman’s time: evening, midnight, cockcrow, and dawn. In the very next chapter, the last supper takes place in the evening; Jesus’ is arrested at midnight; Peter denies Jesus three times before the cock crows, Jesus is delivered to Pilate at dawn. Also in the evening, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says, *keep watch; stay awake*. Mark foreshadows what lies ahead, in the awful and the inconceivable, and in the morning:

The women discover the empty tomb, the sign of Jesus’ resurrection, at dawn. It is the new day.

Today, once again, the first day of Advent, is the church’s new day. This is a new year in our journey together. This whole call of liturgical life and season, begins again. We move to our next cycle of Sunday readings; this is year B, and our gospel readings focus on the gospel of Mark. In our daily readings, the daily office lectionary, we begin Year 2. Being watchful, being prepared, is our invitation and bidding, our welcoming, into the mystery Jesus’ birth and his life; his resurrection and our new life in this world and the next. We cannot see this mystery; instead, we enter into and see this mystery the best, the most clearly, in the person and promise of Jesus. I invite you today to begin again; to come to worship weekly, to read the daily office, to read the bible, or

some portion of it, this year, meaning beginning now. Today is our “New Year’s resolution” day. What will you bring into your life?

First, enter fully into Advent. Today we began counting, and we count not so much on a clock but on a wreath of eternity, the Advent wreath. The wreath counts circular time, which we celebrate season by season, always circling back to the mystery of Jesus’ birth and our awaiting and preparing for Jesus’ return. Jesus’ promise is “ever green,” always alive, so we make a circular wreath of greenery. We mark our counting with four candles: 4, 3, 2, 1. The candles are our symbol of Christ’s light in the world, shining even as we wait for him to come. Each week Christ’s light increases, candle by candle, until the Christ candle shines again into the world. We focus our worship on Word and sacrament, Word and Table, in our usual pattern, noticing that our time is marked by this new light: 4, 3, 2, 1.

Purple or blue candles signify that Advent is different from Lent; while both seasons are ones of preparation, Advent’s focus is to be watchful, awake. A more recent (and actually ancient) tradition, as we use at Redeemer, is to use blue candles and vestments to remind us that, while Advent is solemn and reflective, it is not a penitential season. The purple of Lent marks royalty and penitence. The Advent wreath’s rose candle comes from a long ago tradition that the church has changed over time. Pink represents a rose; the pope used to give someone a rose on the fourth Sunday of Advent. We have moved that rose to the third Sunday, and we mark that day as a break from the solemnity of the season.

I know that it is very difficult to live this time as a solemn season. That’s part of why I find today’s readings so compelling; they are a stark reminder that all in the world and in our lives right now is not lights and elves and presents. Life is real, and hard *and* we are preparing for Jesus. I encourage you to have an Advent wreath at home – make one today, light a candle every evening, and pray in its light for a few minutes each day. Mark your Advent wreath time as your solemnity of the day and of the season. Count down with the Christian world as we await Christ’s coming ... as a baby, ... and in glory forever. Count down with one another, even as we daily shine the light of Christ in our homes.

We need this light of Christ, we need light, in these days: in our personal lives, in a warring, intolerant world, in physical days that get shorter and shorter. Notice more fully, carefully this year, that the darkness begins to diminish just before Jesus arrives. The light comes. Pray in these days. Prepare. When you put up your Christmas tree and string lights in and outside of your home, if you have not done so already, see hope in those lights, see light breaking through every darkness and giving us places of peace. That’s our spiritual journey, right? We seek the peace of Christ, a peace that the world cannot give. While we long for things in ourselves, our homes, families, communities to get better, we bathe in the quiet light of Christ. This season, be watchful. Be watchful for opportunities to invite friends into this life of hope and *spiritual* abundance. Share the invitation to live into the mystery and awe that we find in Christ Jesus. Invite someone to honor solemnity not as sorrow, but as a time to sit in the light that destroys every darkness. Invite. Welcome. Watch and pray.

Advent calls us to a new life, a new start, and it begins today. Our readings are not really awful; they are a call to see God everywhere, to see Christ’s light breaking through the hardest of hearts, to know that the heavens are open and will be so in the completeness and fullness of God’s kingdom, the city of God, on earth. Prepare, brothers and sisters, to seek and see Jesus again and again and again. I invite you to Advent.