

# Advent 4

## Morning Prayer A

First Lesson: Isa 40:1-11

Second Lesson: Luke 3:1-17

## Homily

It's almost Christmas.

Most of our Protestant brethren, in fact,  
are observing "Christmas Sunday".

Anglicans don't do that.

Why not?

Advent is not yet over.

The Church has one more reminder to give us  
that we, and our world,  
are not yet ready for the coming of the Lord.  
In this morning's lessons,  
we hear the prophet Isaiah,  
probably unaware that he spoke of John the Baptist,  
and we hear the Evangelist St. Luke,  
quoting those same words in their fulfillment,  
and both speak words that are comforting words,  
but at the same time terrifying.

Listen to Isaiah:

*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,*

*Prepare ye the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be exalted,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low:  
and the crooked shall be made straight, and the  
rough places plain:*

*And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together:  
for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.*

Ah! Promise, fulfillment, glory.  
What an exciting message!  
Victory is ahead!  
... but, as he goes on

*All flesh is grass,  
and all the goodliness thereof is  
as the flower of the field:  
The grass withereth, the flower fadeth:  
because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it:  
surely the people is grass.  
The grass withereth, the flower fadeth:  
but the word of our God shall stand for ever.*

Does that make us think a bit differently?  
Is there rejoicing and triumph in those words?  
Or are they words to make one tremble?

God, indeed, will triumph  
... but will we?  
or will we burn away?

John said the same thing, quoting Isaiah:

*Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

But John never painted a rosy picture. He went on, speaking to those who considered themselves the chosen people of God:

*O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*

In other words,  
"Have your teachers called you to repent?  
Have you been warned that you are not ready?

What an appropriate message for a time

when most people are gearing up for a blast of a celebration, and very few are thinking of their own sins and shortcomings.

We aren't ready.

*"We have erred and strayed from His ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. ... There is no health in us."*

We just prayed that, and it's true. The manger lies under the shadow of the Cross. The Cross speaks a two-fold truth. First and foremost, that God does not tolerate sin. Our sin deserves His wrath As John said:

*... the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.*

Remember this:  
that sweet baby we picture in the midst of the adoring animals, came as an answer to God's righteous wrath. Were we not in deep trouble by our own choices,

He would not have needed to come.

But, thank God,  
the Cross and the manger speak  
of more than wrath.  
The second side of that message  
is of God's great love  
and of the redemption He offers.  
God looked down  
and in justice could only condemn, but

*So God loved the world  
that he gave his only-begotten Son,  
to the end that all that believe in him  
should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

Listen to what John had to say.

Repent.

That means admit your sins. Proclaim your faults.

Cry out to God for forgiveness,  
and by His help, change.

The Baptizer gave practical instruction:  
Do right. Be honest. Be compassionate.  
Bring forth fruits that truly show repentance.  
To those who continue in their rebellion,  
John as fearsome words:

*[His] fan is in his hand,*

*and he will throughly purge his floor,  
and will gather the wheat into his garner;  
but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.*

For those who turn and who follow,  
Isaiah has powerful words of hope:

*O Zion, that bringest good tidings,  
get thee up into the high mountain;  
O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings,  
lift up thy voice with strength;  
lift it up,  
be not afraid;  
say unto the cities of Judah,  
Behold your God!*

Let us pray.

O Lord, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

see also the sermon by Canon Hollister  
under this date in the Sermons by Other Authors

# Advent 4

## Morning Prayer B

First Lesson: Jer 33:7-16

Second Lesson: 1 Thes 1

## Homily

The world around us is a flurry of activity.  
 Everyone around us  
 seems to be celebrating already.  
 Christmas lights are shining along the streets,  
 on the houses, in the stores.  
 Every store and every restaurant  
 seems to be filled with the season's music.  
 It seems that every business and every club  
 has already had its Yuletide party.  
 Ho, ho, ho, everywhere, but we ...  
 ... we come to church  
 to find the same old somber purple hangings,  
 and we are being told that,  
 even though the church down the street  
 is doing Christmas Sunday,  
 it's not Christmas yet.  
 Do you feel the tension of that?  
 You should,

because that's just exactly why we aren't  
 doing Christmas this morning.

Jeremiah was looking ahead into his own future,  
 speaking to a people who would be in bondage.  
 For them freedom was to be only a memory,  
 a memory of something  
 that could hardly even be imagined.

That was the Hebrew people  
 under the Babylonian captivity,  
 a long, long time ago,  
 but, in a way,  
 he is also speaking to us in the here and now.

His words remind us that we, too, are in bondage.  
 We are in a world that has turned its back on God,  
 that has decided that each of us  
 should have his own way,  
 regardless of what God has declared to be His will.  
 It's easy to see that  
 when we look around at the creeping,  
 or should we say the rushing, tide of immorality,  
 the seeming disintegration of society,  
 the widespread denial of God Himself,  
 all the negative forces that surround us;  
 but that's not where we are called to look.  
 It is not the things happening around us

that enslave us,

As St. Paul wrote:

*"...neither death nor life,  
nor angels, nor principalities nor powers.  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor height, nor depth,  
nor any other creature,  
shall be able to separate us from the love of God,  
which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:37-39)*

It is not the things happening around us  
that enslave us,  
but the things that we harbor within us.

Soon we will celebrate,  
as those Jeremiah addressed were to celebrate,  
but not just yet.

He writes to a people who are still in captivity,  
who still deserve captivity because of their sins,  
who mourn in fully deserved separation.  
It is to them (and to us)  
that He, speaking for God, says:  
"I will cause them to return,  
I will build them up,  
I will cleanse them,

I will forgive their sins,  
and there will be joy, and gladness,  
and shouts of praise."

It's not Christmas  
— not just yet,  
nor has the Lord returned in glory  
— not just yet.  
We are still in a world not ready to receive Him  
— not just yet,  
and, if we are honest with ourselves,  
and with Him,  
we have to admit that we ourselves are not ready  
— not just yet.  
We wait.  
We wait for His coming in power and great glory,  
and because we wait  
for that final and complete redemption,  
we wait a few more days,  
perhaps a bit impatiently,  
feeling, perhaps,  
a bit isolated from the celebrating world,  
maybe a bit uncomfortable  
at the somber nature of our worship today,  
but we wait,  
knowing that we still need redemption,  
but that redemption is surely ahead.

As St. Paul said in the Second Lesson today:

*... ye ... having received the word in much affliction,  
with joy of the Holy Ghost.*

*... were ensamples to all that believe ...*

*... in every place your faith to God-ward is spread  
abroad;*

*... And [ye] wait for his Son from heaven, whom he  
raised from the dead,  
even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to  
come.*

Christmas is coming.

and so is His return.

May we, under his prodding and under his direction,  
by the grace of His coming,  
prepare a way for Him in our own hearts,  
and in the world around us.

Let us pray.

O Lord, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come  
among us, and with great might succour us; that  
whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are  
sore let and hindered in running the race that is set  
before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may  
speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ

our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost,  
be honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

# Advent 4

## Evening Prayer A

First Lesson: Isa 40:12-18, [19-20] 21-31

Second Lesson: 1 Thes 3:7

### Homily

What do you think  
when you watch the evening news?  
It seems  
we have an overload of information these days.  
We hear about events from all around the world,  
and few of them are pleasant.  
There are wars and rumors of wars,  
famines, plagues and assorted thieveries.  
We hear about an enormous amount  
of hatred and strife,  
and only a very little goodwill.  
Why is that?  
Is it true that there is nothing good worth reporting?  
Why is so much of our thinking and conversation  
given over to seemingly endless complaining?  
What is the matter with this world?  
What is the matter with us?

Did you hear the Prophet Isaiah this evening?  
Did you find that lesson pleasant?  
Or did it maybe shake you a little? It should.  
We complain,  
and, yes, there is a lot to complain about,  
but who made this world anyway?  
There was a widely distributed poster  
a few years ago, that said:  
***"God don't make no junk."***

Well, He doesn't.  
At the end of the Sixth Day of Creation,  
He looked on what he had made, and He said,  
***"It is very good".***

But is it?  
Why is there so much to complain about?  
What went wrong?  
We did.

However we understand the details of Creation,  
The first three chapter of Genesis make it clear  
that God's plan was for a world filled with beauty  
and everything necessary  
to support a well-ordered life,  
and that man's desire to have his own way,  
in opposition to God's plan,  
messed everything up.

The short word for that is --- "sin".

Isaiah delivers God's challenge  
to the people of his day,  
and to us as well:

"Oh, little man, who do you think you are?  
Who are you in comparison with God?  
Does He need your advice to run this world?"

In two verses the lectionary allows us to omit,  
he brings the point home.  
In those days a man might decide  
to make himself an idol and worship it.  
Was the image therefore God?  
What power did it have?

We don't do that any more,  
but we build corporations,  
we make a career for ourselves,  
we build bigger and fancier houses,  
we develop just the entertainments we want,  
and our lives are full of the things we have made.  
Is that really any different?

What if God has a different idea?  
Are we really ready to obey Him?  
When Adam and Eve sinned,

they tried to hide from the sight of God.  
Does that work?  
As Isaiah asked:

*Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel,  
My way is hid from the LORD,  
and my judgment is passed over from my God?  
Hast thou not known?  
hast thou not heard,  
that the everlasting God, the LORD,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth,  
fainteth not, neither is weary?  
there is no searching of his understanding.*

"But I can't help it," we may say,  
or as Flip Wilson used to put it:  
"The Devil made me do it."

Nonsense.  
We may be weak, but our God is strong.  
The Prophet went on:

*He giveth power to the faint;  
and to them that have no might  
he increaseth strength.  
Even the youths shall faint and be weary,  
and the young men shall utterly fall:  
But they that wait upon the LORD  
shall renew their strength;*

*they shall mount up with wings as eagles;  
they shall run, and not be weary;  
and they shall walk, and not faint.*

It's almost Christmas.

This week we will celebrate his coming  
as the Babe of Bethlehem.

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

And we look forward to His ultimate coming  
to bring an end to the reign of sin.

As St. Paul said in the Second Lesson:

*... the Lord make you to increase and abound  
in love one toward another,  
and toward all men, even as we do toward you:  
To the end he may stablish your hearts  
unblameable in holiness before God,  
even our Father,  
at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ  
with all his saints.*

Let us pray.

O Lord, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come  
among us, and with great might succour us; that  
whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are  
sore let and hindered in running the race that is set  
before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may

speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ  
our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be  
honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

# Advent 4

## Evening Prayer B

First Lesson: Isa 42:1-16

Second Lesson: Matt 11:11-24

### Homily

*Woe unto thee, Chorazin!  
woe unto thee, Bethsaida!  
for if the mighty works, which were done in you,  
had been done in Tyre and Sidon,  
they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and  
ashes.*

Oof! That hurts!

These are the words of our loving Savior,  
and he's speaking to two of the cities  
that saw most of his mighty works.  
That's what it says.

Chorazin and Bethsaida were Jewish cities.  
Their people were worshipers of the one true God.  
They gathered week by week, even day by day,  
in the synagogues to pray and to hear God's Word.  
They tried to organize their whole lives

by the Law that God had given them.  
And the Messiah came and walked among them,  
and there were healings,  
and a few lives were changed,  
and they didn't know who he was,  
and went about their business as they always did,  
as if God really wasn't there at all.

John came fasting and calling for repentance,  
and they cried out in scorn.  
They criticized him for not celebrating with them.  
They thought he was crazy.

You know, there's a lot of pretty wild celebrating  
going on today.

There are Christmas parties and Holiday parties  
everywhere.

Most of the churches around us  
are keeping "Christmas Sunday" today.  
Our altar is dressed in somber purple.  
It's not the pretty Baby in the manger  
that we're thinking about.

No, we're listening  
to some pretty scorching words.  
We're thinking about  
our own unworthiness to celebrate.  
We're thinking about  
His coming again in glory as judge.

Jesus' words this morning tell us  
 that we, the people of God, are not ready,  
 We're expected to celebrate,  
 and celebration will come soon enough,  
 this week, in fact.  
 But it's not time yet. We still mourn,  
 and they think we're nuts  
 We still mourn,  
 because we haven't yet finished the work of Advent.  
 We still mourn  
 because our repentance  
 and our cleansing are not complete.

But then Messiah came.  
 He ate and he drank.  
 He sat down with the sinners.  
 He wasn't serious enough to satisfy them.  
 They scorned Him as not 'religious' enough,  
 not as solemn and dignified as He should be.

They knew what Messiah should be like,  
 and it wasn't like either of these two.  
 It had to be their way or no way at all.

Like them, we have the Scriptures.  
 We have the God-given tradition.  
 We are the ones He gave it to.

We have time-honored, beautiful, and correct ways of worship.

In so many ways we are right,  
 but, before we undertake  
 the celebration of His birth,  
 we need to ask this:

Do we know Him as He walks among us?  
 Do we live our lives as though He is present?  
 We are called to be His people,  
 but are we His?

Isaiah gave voice to the Lord's cry:  
*"Behold my servant ... He shall not fail ..."*  
 He says that He shall come,  
*"To open the blind eyes,*  
*to bring out the prisoners from the prison,*  
*and them that sit in darkness*  
*out of the prison house,"*  
 but he also says,  
*The LORD shall go forth as a mighty man,*  
*he shall stir up jealousy like a man of war:*  
*he shall cry, yea, roar;*  
*he shall prevail against his enemies."*

The Incarnation is far more  
 than the sweet story of a pure child,

the bleating of sheep, the mooing of cows,  
and the singing of angels.

It's not a victory -- not yet --

It's a battle in a war fought on Calvary,  
won in the Resurrection,  
but not yet ended until He comes again in glory,  
but in the end,

when the age is over,  
we will find that, in all our struggle,  
in all our failure,  
He has been with us. As Isaiah said, He  
*"... will bring the blind by a way that they knew not;  
... lead them in paths that they have not known:*

*... make darkness light before them, and crooked  
things straight.*

*These things will I do unto them,  
says the Lord  
and not forsake them."*

Let us pray.

O Lord, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come  
among us, and with great might succour us; that  
whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are  
sore let and hindered in running the race that is set  
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