

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The First Sunday in Advent

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the twenty-eighth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“Wherefore hear the word of the LORD, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:

“Therefore thus saith [SETH] the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place.

“And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it. From the time that it goeth forth it shall take you: for morning by morning shall it pass over, by day and by night: and it shall be a vexation only to understand the report. For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it. For the LORD shall rise up as in mount Perazim [PAIR-azz-imm], he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act. Now therefore be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strong: for I have heard from the Lord GOD of hosts a consumption, even determined upon the whole earth.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews³

“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears. For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:) But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom

- At His next Coming, He will call each of us to give an account of our life;
- Those who withstand that Judgement will spend eternity with Him in heaven; and
- Those who fail that Judgement will spend eternity in hell.

When heard against the background of those somber realities, the constant clanging of sleigh bells sounds particularly futile. There is true joy in Christmas, but it is not a joy that can be purchased at the cash register; it has already been purchased for us by Our Saviour's blood.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister⁷
November 29, 2009.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928/1943).

² Isaiah 28: 14-22 (KJV).

³ Hebrews 12: 14-29 (KJV).

⁴ Isaiah 28: 16-17 (RSV).

⁵ HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 855 n. 17b-22 (Oxford University Press, Inc. 1977).

⁶ *Ibid.* 854 n. 16-17a.

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which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“[T]hus says the Lord GOD,
Behold, I am laying in Zion for a foundation
a stone, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation:
‘He who believes in me will not be in haste.’
And I will make justice the line,
and righteousness the plummet;
and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies,
and the waters will overwhelm the shelter.”⁴

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Anyone who recalls the news reports from this past summer, telling of violent storms and torrential rains that caused massive flooding throughout the Midwest, will easily understand Isaiah's image “hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters will overwhelm the shelter.” Clearly, he is saying that the faithless will be swept away by the storm of God's wrath.⁵

Theme:

So Isaiah is foretelling God's coming in judgement, when those who trust God (to whom Isaiah gives the symbolic name “He who believes will not be in haste”⁶) will be

saved and those who have not trusted God will be swept away, like the victims of a flood whose houses have been overwhelmed. To the rest of the world, which thinks of Advent, when it thinks of it at all, as simply the beginning of the rushed “pre-holiday” shopping season, this is a strange selection for the Scriptures to be read on the first day of the Advent season.

Christians, the world would say, are supposed to be getting ready for the coming of the Christ Child so, when all the world is focused on hurrying to the shops to search for the first “door buster” bargains, why are they not reading the infancy narratives, the stories of the babe in the manger In Bethlehem and the like?

Development:

To the well-instructed Christian, however, it is perfectly natural that our Advent season, the time of “coming”, should open with a reminder of the “Second Coming”, when Our Lord, the very same babe who was born in Bethlehem in a human body, will come in divine Glory to judge both the living and the dead.

There will be time enough during the twelve days of the Christmas Season to have our fill of babies, mangers, crèche scenes, angels, shepherds, anachronistic Wise Men, and all the paraphernalia of the joyous celebration of Our Lord’s Incarnation. But, while still in that season, only three days after Christmas itself we will remember the Holy Innocents, who remind us not just of those particular children whom Harod sacrificed to his worldly ambitions but who always remind us that every birth inevitably leads, one day, to a death.

So Advent, the season in which we are instructed to meditate upon the meaning of Christ’s birth is precisely the season in which we must recall that His birth was given to us

for a specific purpose. And that purpose was to help us to prepare ourselves for His coming again, with Glory, to judge both the quick and the dead. Only the person and message of that baby, when He was grown to manhood and took up His ministry among us, can save us when the very same Man comes, the Son of God, to demand from each of us an accounting of how we have lived out our Christian vocation.

Judgment may seem a rather lugubrious topic, when all around us bright lights and decorations are being hoisted up and public spaces are filled with the witless words and simple-minded tunes of non-religious but politically-correct “holiday” music. But we must not be distracted by dipsomaniac reindeer, anthropomorphized “persons of snow”, or chipmunks on “speed”, none of which have anything to do with why Christmas began to be celebrated in the first place.

As those around us are laying up “treasures” that will, at best, last one cycle of fashion seasons, we are remembering the inescapable truths that in the midst of life we are in death, that death is followed by judgment, and that judgment is the prelude to an eternity spent either in heaven or in hell.

Conclusion:

So, as we wait to celebrate our real Christmas present – which was, and is, God’s gift to us of Himself, and therefore, if we choose to accept it and keep it, of everlasting life with Him, we can spare a mere four weeks to think upon what we, as Christians, need to guide ourselves by:

- As each of us was born, so each of us will die;
- Our Lord’s Coming in a human body is merely the prelude to His Coming again;