

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The First Sunday in Advent

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

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 birth-right. 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 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.”

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

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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 Hebrews 12:11 (RSV).

⁵ The phrase “Minor Prophets” refers to the relative length of the books involved, not to their importance in the estimation of the ancient Hebrews.

⁶ Haggai 2:6 (NIV 1984).

⁷ Hebrews 12:27 (NIV 1984).

⁸ Hebrews 12:28a (RSV).

⁹ Hebrews 12:28b (RSV).

shakes the foundations of the earth. He is our Maker and our Judge.

I suspect that the loss of awesome reverence in the worship of the Church may account to some extent for the popularity of horror films in our day. I have often wondered why people pay to be scared. Why do they scream and cover their eyes and then come back for more?

Perhaps it is because there is something in our nature as human beings that tells us we are not really gods, even if our technology and our politics tell us we are. Perhaps we do not even want to be the most powerful form of life in the whole universe. Perhaps we need to escape from the material world into a spiritual world in which we feel we belong even though we are frightened by it. Perhaps God is telling us something by the popularity of this genre. Perhaps we really need to experience once more, as the Jews did at Mt. Sinai, the terrifying power of God. Perhaps we need to recover that aspect of worship in our churches.

It is an awesome and terrifying experience to be tested and purified and perfected by God. I am sure you would prefer, as I would, not to go through such an ordeal. But God is not your copilot, nor is he mine. God is in charge. When He shakes the foundations of your life, He is doing it so that only what is unshakable may remain. Then He will build once again on that unshakable core.

And I can also tell you this. When you have come through that painful and frightening process-- and because God is in charge we will come through it -- you will be better and stronger and more like Christ, the beloved Son in Whose image you were created.

“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the eleventh Verse of the twelfth Chapter of Epistle to the Hebrews: “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

That text precedes the beginning of the Second Lesson, and it summarizes what I have to say about the Lesson. You know, if you join the Marines, they will rock you right down to the soles of your feet. They will take away your dignity, your confidence, your sense of identity, and everything else you have accumulated in the course of your life. They want to get down to that hard core that is your inner self. Then they will build on that to make you a soldier.

God does the same thing, only He remakes us into the image of His Son. He strips us down sacramentally in Holy Baptism and washes away all the sin that clings to us simply because we live in the world. He gives us a name, which is to say an identity. Then He begins the long process of molding us and shaping us through contact with other Christians.

But from time to time God has to shake us again to remove what is appropriate only to life in this world. He does that so that what is not of this world may flourish.

There are people in the world today who have lost their homes and all their possessions. There are others who have lost everything in a war or in an economic tragedy. In the process, many have found a certain inner strength that remains unshaken. There are people who have lost an arm or a leg or have suffered the loss of their vision or their ability to speak, and have discovered within themselves an unshakable core of their own personhood.

There are people among us today who have lost members of their families. Their lives have been shaken and radically altered by that loss. They have suffered mightily, but their faith remains unshaken.

These people understand why the Cross is the central symbol of our religion. On it, our Lord and Savior was stripped of everything that this world has to offer in order that the essence of His true humanity and ours might be raised from the dead and shine forth in unfiltered and unreflected glory.

Jesus Himself spoke of the Cross as a kind of baptism. So our own baptism, while it is not sacramentally repeated, is played out in the breaking down and building up, the death and rebirth that periodically takes place in our lives by the grace of God.

In the Second Lesson for today, the writer makes reference to a text from one of the Minor Prophets:⁵ “This is what the LORD Almighty says, ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth...’”⁶ Then the writer explains that the text indicates the removal of what is shaken – “that is, of created things -- so that what cannot be shaken may remain.”⁷

The word that is here translated as “created things” is a hard word to translate because it has a wide range of meanings. I believe the reference in this context is to what we might call “things temporal” -- the creation as something of limited value and duration as opposed to the Kingdom of God, which has abiding and eternal value. “Therefore let us be grateful,” he says, “for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken”.⁸

Specifically, the author of Hebrews is referring to the Jewish temple and its cultic practices, which he says are but earthly reflections and precursors of the true temple, which is spiritual and which Christ has entered as the eternal high priest.

Then the author continues, “and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe....”⁹ We can get an idea

of what constitutes “acceptable worship” by referring to a passage in St. Paul: “I appeal to you ... by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

And if you want to know what he means by “a living sacrifice”, listen to a preacher of the ancient church, St. John Chrysostom: “How is the body to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it has already become a sacrifice. Let the tongue say nothing filthy, and it has become an offering. Let your hand do nothing evil, and it has become a whole burnt offering. But even this is not enough, for we must have good works also. The hand must do alms, the mouth must bless those who curse it, and the ears must find time to listen to the reading of Scripture.”

Better yet, listen to what Jesus says in St. John’s Gospel: “The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain [that is Mt. Gerazim where the Samaritans had built a great temple] nor in Jerusalem [where the Jews had built a great temple]... but the hour is coming and now is when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth”.

Acceptable worship, you see, really has little to do with church buildings, with vestments, with liturgies and processions or any of those other created things that belong to the temporal world. And yet these may be of some value to the extent that they remind us of the awesome majesty of the God we worship. As the writer says, “let us offer to God acceptable worship, *with reverence and awe*; for our God is a consuming fire”.

Many Christians today have lost this element of genuine fear in the presence of God. We like to think of God as our friend and companion. I am always amused when I see a bumper sticker proclaiming God as the driver’s co-pilot. I cringe when people sing that awful hymn about walking in the garden alone with God and engaging in intimate conversation with Him. It is true that God loves us, but that does not make Him our equal, much less our subordinate co-pilot. He is the One who rides upon the storm and