

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The First Sunday in Advent¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the twenty-eighth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“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 [PURR-uh-zim], 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:⁴ Here beginneth the twenty-first Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“When they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage [**BETH-fuh-dgee**], unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass. And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, and brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest. And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee.

“And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Good morning and Happy New Year! Today we embark upon a new year in the liturgical calendar and cycles of prayer. We see a change has occurred within the use of our liturgical colors, in that we begin our new liturgical year in a mode of penance and reconciliation. What I truly enjoy about the ecclesial new year, we don't get the false notion that the old is gone and the new has come. We get the exact opposite: the old is ever ancient, and the ancient is ever present. We don't worry about fads and resolutions, because the truth has been revealed and never changes. Our Scriptures remain the same. Our Liturgy remains the same. Our Faith unchanged for twenty-one centuries. Even our Eucharistic lections for Advent have been used by the Church since the Fifth Century. In a world so unstable and chaotic, one can find stability and peace in know that we believe that Jesus Christ IS the same yesterday, today, and forever, and so is His Church.

Advent comes from the Latin term "adventus" which means "coming." "Adventus" is also the Latin translation of the Greek word "parousia," which is usually connected with the Second Coming of Christ. So as we begin our New Year and cycle of prayer, we prepare ourselves for the Second Coming by taking on a mindset of repentance and reconciliation (hence the use of violet vestments), while commemorating the First Coming of Christ at the Feast of the Nativity. The season of Advent serves as a reminder both of the original waiting that was done by the Hebrews for the birth of their Messiah, as well as the waiting of Christians for Christ's return.

Now in Western Catholic Christendom, there are no requirements of Fasting, except those days which are always proposed by the Book of Common Prayer, commonly all Fridays in the year. But it is encouraged that we increase our acts of penance and almsgiving, and find God's grace within Sacramental Confession. And it is fitting that we begin this season of reconciliation with the collect for this morning. We ask God to give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon the armour of light.

What are the works of darkness that war against our immortal souls? They could be categorized by the pursuit of four things: Wealth, Pleasure, Power, and Honor. And it is these four things that Christ, in His earthly ministry, taught that we should shun and detach ourselves from. From the beginning of His public preaching with the Sermon on the Mount, to the public humiliation of His scourging and death, He taught us that the culmination of the Divine life, a life lived consummated by His glory, could only be attained by separating ourselves from these four pillars of sin.

It might be easier to say that one should die to self. But in minimizing those things which keep self on the pedestal of our hearts, we may not completely discern, or come to the knowledge of, those things that keep us weighted down in sin. And a lack of knowledge or understanding may be the difference between living the freedom we have in Christ, or struggling to make sense of the world, being bogged down by sin through our own self inflicted wounds to the immortality of our human soul.

The one thing that combats these four pillars of sin is love. In the eighth chapter of Romans, which today is both the Epistle for Holy Communion and one of the appointed Second Lessons at Morning Prayer, Paul writes that we should owe no man anything, but should love one another: “for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.” Just see how this exhortation frees us from those four pillars of sin. He says, “thou shalt not commit adultery.” In not allowing ourselves to be carried away by sensual desires, we have the freedom to love those who we are bound to by the covenant of holy matrimony, without being seduced by the ever-present suggestion that if our desires are not met, then we can freely abandon our spouses go to others to fulfill our desires.

The self-sacrificial love between man and woman in the sacrament of matrimony is a type, an earthly reality of a greater,

³ Isaiah 28:14-22 (KJV).

⁴ “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ St. Matthew 21:1-13 (KJV).

⁶ Rector, St. Charles King and Martyr Anglican Church, APCK, Huntsville, AL.

for God truly looks like, look to Christ Crucified. There He is truly detached from those four elements, wealth, pleasure, power, and honor.

Wealth: Jesus forsook the wealth of men. He hung there naked, giving up everything with nothing to show for His earthly ministry. Pleasure: actually, He was at the pinnacle of physical pain and agony; He was completely detached from physical pleasure. The only pleasure He sought was in fulfilling the will of God. Power: being nailed to the Cross, He was completely powerless in His mission to fulfill the Divine plan. Honor: He was completely mocked and ridiculed, beaten and spat upon.

Yet, in accordance with the Beatitudes, He was at that moment the ultimate peace maker, the ultimate dispenser of divine mercy, the ultimate example of meekness, the ultimate example of purity of heart. He hungered after the righteousness of God and was the pinnacle of being persecuted for righteousness sake. But if this is true and St. Thomas Aquinas is correct, then even though this seems absurdly contradictory, the image of Christ hanging on the Cross, bruised, beaten, battered, and left to die, is an image of happiness and joy, finding personal fulfillment solely in fulfilling the will of God. This is an image of a man lost in the love of the Father, raptured away in fulfilling the divine plan, completely at rest in the Father's arms. How do we compare with that?

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle and Gospel for Holy Communion on the First Sunday in Advent, 2011.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

divine mystery, of the love shared between Christ and his Church. It was the love of God that drove Him to send His Only-Begotten Son to unite humanity to Himself. And it was His self-sacrificial love that the Church submits to. We can only find pleasure within the confines of self-sacrificial love. To find pleasure elsewhere, steals our hearts away, and places our needs above those we are supposed to serve.

“Thou shalt not kill,” St. Paul writes as he continues to recite the Decalogue in his exhortation. Killing someone is driven by our desire to display our power over someone. A murderer has a distorted need to take someone's life, in that, it is through his own strength that he has the power to decide whether the victim lives or dies. This distorted need is felt by one who is driven by a loss of control, or power to control, events or circumstances in his own life. And a desire to control the outcome of someone else's circumstances becomes so overwhelming that the ultimate exercise of power takes root in the killer's heart. Thus acts of violence are only the manifestations of their doers' brokenness.

That is why we need to take St. Augustine's words to heart, “Our hearts will be perpetually restless, until we find rest in God.” When we grasp the idea that we should love the Lord our God, with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds, we grasp that we are not in control of who or what we are, but the God who loves us will provide for us and will see us through. We will then relinquish the power and control over our own lives, and place that authority into the hands of God.

“Thou shalt not steal,” “Thou shalt not covet.” We only take for ourselves those things in which we feel we lack. The desire for wealth is an overwhelming desire, especially with the current state of our economy. We feel we have to hoard all that we can, in the event of an economic catastrophe. And that which we do acquire is used to fulfill our own material gratifications. How glorious it would be if those who acquired wealth, understood the basic tenet of stewardship. The wealth

in which we have does not belong to us, but should be used to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked.

That is why Jesus speaks against wealth, and tells us to store up our treasures in heaven rather than upon earth. Because we won't use the means we have received to fulfill the Church's mission, to be the hands and feet of God. In times as trying as they are now, we center our accumulation of goods on our own material gratification, securing a financial future for ourselves, while neglecting the needs of others. A hallmark quality of the Church in the book of Acts was the selling off of one's goods, to meet the needs of those without. How much more could we impact the world, if we as the Church placed our money where our mouth is?

St. Paul also echoes the Decalogue in saying "Thou shalt not bear false witness," or "Thou shalt not tell a lie." We only lie to make our selves, or circumstances, seem better than what they really are. Therefore, instead of honoring God or honoring others with our lips, we desire the Honor of others. And we will stop at nothing to get the honor, or respect, we feel we deserve. In desiring honor for ourselves, we take the focus off of the One who truly deserves honor, and that is God Almighty. He is the One in which we breathe, move, and have our being, so to take acknowledgement away from Him can only mean we place ourselves in higher regard than we do Him. Self-love or self-adulation is the cause of the fall of man, which forms the circumstances in which we live. To be god or to be god-like, was the aim of Adam and Eve, because being created as a little lower than the Angels was not sufficient for them. This desire for honor steals away our obedience to God and places enmity between creation and its Creator.

"Love worketh no ill to his neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." We do not recite the Summary of the Law because it sounds well within our liturgy. This is what keeps us pure and holy, to live as Christ lived, to love as Christ loved. When we love the Lord our God, with all our hearts,

souls and minds, and then love our neighbor as ourselves, the four pillars of iniquity begin to crumble. Visualize Samson's pushing over the pillars of the temple of Dagon where he was displayed to be mocked, and he shook that temple's foundations to bring death to the Philistines who sneered at him. The power of God's love radiating within our earthly temples brings crashing down the pillars of sin upon those who sneer at and jeer you, and upon the demonic forces at work against your life.

Our detachment from these things is what freedom in Christ is all about. Our dependence on the will of God alone can satisfy. We will be perpetually restless until we find rest in the love of God. That was the theme of Christ's ministry. That was the theme of Christ's Passion.

Our Second Lesson, which is the Gospel at the Eucharist today, points to Our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Once there, He walked into the Temple of God and saw the manifestations of these four elements at work in the everyday goings-on there. Those money-changers desired wealth. They also desired power because they controlled which animals were sacrificed. And they built their wealth on the Jews who approached the sacrifices with nonchalance. They desired honor for they attained prestige by providing a blasphemous service to the careless Jews who came to sacrifice without first providing their own suitable animals for sacrifice. And worse, instead of being dishonored by conducting their commerce in the Temple, these money-changers and animal-peddlers gained an undeserved appearance of holiness by trading upon the Temple's rites and observances.

Jesus could no longer allow the Temple to be desecrated. A place of prayer, the center of God's love, the Temple of God's provision was being destroyed by those things that lead men astray. And so, in self sacrifice, He gave the prime example of what one submitted to the love of God truly looked like. St. Thomas Aquinas said once that to find what the fulfillment of the beatitudes, to find what peace and joy and the love