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The Second Sunday in Advent

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IN MY END IS MY BEGINNING

These words of Eliot capture the meaning of Advent. The Lord comes when time is rolled up like a garment. He judges the quick and the dead. And the frail nature of man is swallowed up in the awesome power of eternity. "Wake awake, the night is flying!"

The Scriptures teach us everywhere to fear God. We do so because it is the beginning of wisdom, and man lives well when he lives by wisdom. But we also fear God because of his immense power, and because of his holiness and purity. We are told over and over that he is just and that his justice shall reign over all the earth.

And so we fear him. We are none of these things, neither wise nor powerful, nor holy nor pure nor just. As the Prayer Book says, "There is no health in us." We may fancy ourselves a judge, and with haughty self-righteousness claim the right, but only God knows. Our righteousness, "filthy rags" as Isaiah calls them, even dressed up in gentlemanly manners, does not accomplish justice, only the momentary profusions of pride, and the pleasure of petty power and revenge. In the end, spiritual pride has no real substance and no lasting quality, except the destruction and heartache that remain.

And so the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It is hopeful wisdom, hopeful that our filthy rags will be washed and that we might see beyond the myopia of our present condition. It is a grave and solemn hope, hope that reaches down into the depths of despair. And there, with the most awesome power, hope awaits joy.

"Come thou long expected Jesus!" The grave and powerful hope of Advent is that the judgment of God shall be utterly complete. The cry we make every morning and evening in our prayers, "O God, make clean our hearts within us," will have an end. The end is in the coming of Christ who comes as judge, and who comes as judge because he has already come as the Son of Man.

It seems strange to say that we look forward to our end. But we do. It is not strange at all to Christians who are aware of their inner contradictions, and who desire to be rid of them. But this is nonsense to the non-believer. He has no regret. He does not truly suffer the flaws of his character. He only uses them as the opportunity to metamorphose into another protean advantage. His truism, often expressed, "Nobody is perfect" is an empty judgment. It offers no hope, only permission to err, a reduction of humanity to bestiality.

Christianity offers hope and hope that

expects the good to triumph and the divided heart to find its long looked for union. And in this way, in the healing and wholeness of you and me, there is a beginning. It is the new birth grown to full maturity, the contradiction solved, the habits of the heart made pure in love. That is the beginning in the end, the life God brings in judgment and in salvation. But it is the mature perspective of the Christian, and that is why it is the great theme of Advent. "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult."

In my end is my beginning. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit." "And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end." What a hopeful end and a glorious beginning. There is death, yes. There is judgment, yes. But there is also much fruit, and the kingdom that shall have no end.

That is why the Church in her great wisdom has cultivated the season of Advent. It is a grave and majestic meditation on these great themes of Christian truth. It is what we profess to be true reality.

Our worship here at St. John's reflects this very gravity, solemnity, and expected joy. Only such a solemn reverence can plumb the depths of our spiritual illness, and look to heal the heartache of our condition. Only an expectation exercised in high ceremony can lift our heads from ugliness to beauty. Only a solemn expectation of judgment can hope for God's purifying fire. Only the realization of our sorrow can be ready to receive his glory. "Lo! He comes with clouds descending!"

In my end is my beginning. Advent reminds us of this fact every year. It is the meditation that wakes us up from spiritual slumber. And makes us to shout with joy!

That is why, in Advent, we offer the Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, and Holy Communion, Monday through Friday. That is why we keep our worship on Sunday as the main event. It is to wake us up, to look for the coming of the Lord, to watch and wait for our First Love.

These acts of worship are what actually wake us up. Of course, God meets us continually in all sorts of ways, he comes when we least expect him, as a thief in the night. But the church has strong medicine for our illness, an antidote to our deadly sins. If you want to be delivered from your sickness you will come to church, and by grace you will discover hope and beauty and joy. If you think that you are not ill, spiritually speaking, then you will not darken the door with your shadow.

Finally, Advent is a preparation. It sets the tone and focus, the rhythm and tempo, of our spiritual life. We begin the Church Year as a way of reminding us to be ready and to watch. Along with his prayers, Martin Luther recited the Creed every morning when he got out of bed. It was important for him to begin every day with the truths of his religion, especially "From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." He made it a habit to watch.

Watching is what we are all called to do, to give spiritual expectation a centrality in our lives. And that is why we are brought each year to the season of Advent, to participate in the pomp and majesty of solemn and joyful liturgy, to proclaim and discover the coming of the King. It is utter joy, because in my end is my beginning, and in my beginning is my true and everlasting and perfect end, all joy and pleasure and peace, in a word, glory.

The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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