

“Here It Comes Ready or Not”
First Sunday in Advent
November 27, 2011
Pastor George P. Heberling

Old Testament: Isaiah 64: 1-9
Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19
Epistle: I Corinthians 1: 3-9
Gospel: Mark 13: 24-37

Just in case you are wondering, there are twenty eight days left until Christmas. But I don't think I need to tell you that. Now that Thanksgiving is over, the press of preparing for Christmas seems to be a major concern for a lot of people. There are lights and decorations that need to be pulled out of the attic or basement and checked before putting them in the yard or on the house; there is the tree to put up, along with all the other preparations for adorning the house; there are the presents that need to be purchased and wrapped; there are the obligatory dinners both to attend and to prepare; there are the company parties and gatherings of friends and relatives; there are the cookies to bake and the meals to prepare. You know the routine – and most of your calendars are filled with activities and events for the next month. You know that there are deadlines that have to be met, and, even though it will cause you a great deal of stress and anxiety, you will meet those deadlines. By the time we gather for Christmas Eve Services, you will be ready. You might be exhausted, you may just wish the whole Christmas ‘thing’ was over, you might feel a measure of tension, but you know what you have to do in order to celebrate the season, and you will put forth the time and the energy to make sure that what needs to be accomplished is done.

In the midst of the hecticness and busyness of the season, to know that there is a deadline can be a rather secure thing. We know what needs to be done in order to be prepared, and we know that there is a deadline and when the deadline is. Before December 25th, there is a list that must be completed. The down side to the next twenty eight days, however, is that in being so concerned about completing the list of things that need to be done, we will miss the whole purpose of the Advent season. We can get so involved in wondering how we will accomplish all the preparations for Christmas that we lose the wonder of Advent. Advent is an awesome experience of God getting in touch with human beings. So much of it seems too good to be true. It is awesome in the sense that God is veiled in human flesh, and in Christ God was reconciling the world to the merciful presence of a loving God. The text in this morning's Gospel lesson reminds us that Christmas is not about preparing and decorating our homes, or celebrating in parties and dinners, or giving gifts, but rather in preparing our lives for the coming of God in Christ Jesus.

Advent is meant to give a new sense of hope, optimism, joy and love. It is meant to instill within us the expectation that something significant is about to happen. It's easy to think about the deadline that we have meet by December 25th, but in the midst of the pressure of that deadline, it is easy to forget other deadlines – the fact that the same Jesus who was born in a manger in Bethlehem will return in the future as the ruler of the universe. That deadline is not given as a year or a month or a day; consequently, it is easy to postpone preparing for that deadline. It can wait until we have more time.

Right now, God, I'm not ready to think about some vague day in the future. We put off preparing for an unknown deadline because the concrete deadlines seem so near and so pressing.

This morning's Scripture reminds us that we should not, in a sense, be trapped by the familiar stories of Christmas that we will read in the coming weeks. They remind us indeed, of the great love of God at work in the world in giving us the gift of salvation found in Jesus. It is a story that will be read in every part of the world this Advent season, in every dialect and every language. It will be dramatized in pageants and cantatas and concerts. The memory of God's love made known in Bethlehem will be celebrated with carols and sermons, with crowded pews and lighted candles.

But of equal importance for our faith are the remembering and the preparing for the event that is yet to come. This same Jesus calls us to prepare for his return, to prepare our hearts and our minds and our souls for that unknown day when Christ will transform this universe and reign over us for eternity. Advent is a foretaste of that event and an opportunity for us to renew our commitment to the Christ who comes to be among us.

It is tempting to become preoccupied with all the preparations that are necessary for December 25th. This list is long and the demands seem overwhelming. Yet this Advent season calls us to be really preparing our lives for the event that awaits, and for which there is no specific date set. We live aware, however, that it will come – at the time of God, and God alone. In God's choosing, we put our real hope and our real trust.

It is entirely appropriate this morning that we begin Advent by celebrating together in the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. It is the reminder that we have of the meaning of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and the feast that awaits us when he returns to rule over us. It is a joining of Advent preparation and Christian celebration in the context of Easter resurrection. It causes us to pause and remember the wonder of his birth while at the same time inviting us to be fed for the journey that leads to his return. As we celebrate this feast and recall the sacrifice, then let us begin this Advent season in the right spiritual frame of mind. Let us be nurtured and strengthened for preparing our hearts and minds and souls for the day, not only when we observe his birth, but indeed that day when Christ will return. Let us get ready; we know when Christmas is coming, but let us prepare ourselves for that day when Christ's realm is established for all time.