

1st Sunday of Advent (Cycle B)

November 30, 2008 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Today's passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah is part of a psalm of lament. In about 586 BC, Jerusalem was conquered and the Chosen People were exiled to Babylon. Now it's years later. Some of the exiles have returned. But the Jerusalem they left is almost unrecognizable now.

They find the Temple in ruins, Jerusalem destroyed. We don't hear the rest of the passage today, but Isaiah goes on to say,

Be not so very angry, LORD,
keep not our guilt forever in mind;
look upon us, who are all your people.
Your holy cities have become a desert,
Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a waste.
Our holy and glorious temple
in which our fathers praised you
Has been burned with fire;
all that was dear to us is laid waste.
Can you hold back, O LORD, after all this?
Can you remain silent, and afflict us so severely?

For them, all of this has happened as punishment for their failure to do the will of God. All of this is a consequence of their sins – the sins of the writer, and the sins of his nation. They have all “become like unclean people.” The psalmist sort of anticipates Paul when he realizes that their good deeds won't save them – “all our good deeds are like polluted rags.” They can only be made whole through faith

and repentance – and watching for the Lord. He calls on God to intervene.

MOVE

We are like the Chosen People. Once again today, we are reminded that we have all wandered far from him. We are reminded that the Lord is coming. We are reminded to be on watch. We come face to face with a God who is our Father, and with the reality of our own sinfulness before him.

Truly, we have wandered away from him, like the Chosen People. But like the Chosen People, we have faith in the Covenant – “I will be your God, AND you will be my people” – not “IF” you will be my people. Even if we are unfaithful – and we are – we know that he is faithful. He cannot be otherwise.

He has sent his own Son to us as a sign of his forgiveness, to free us from the consequences of our sins. At this time of the year, we are reminded to be alert so that the coming of the Son does not find us unprepared.

MOVE

I think I’ve talked before about the Didache – “The Teaching of the Twelve” – a first-century Christian writing that’s not part of Scripture but still gives us some insight into early Christian beliefs and practices. The Didache talks about two ways – the way of life, and the way of death – the way of darkness, and the way of light. There is a sharp contrast between light and darkness, between God’s way and the way of darkness.

Now, the way of light is not the way of the Christmas lights at the Mall. We're talking about something different here.

MOVE

There's a sermon by Saint Bernard – it comes up next Wednesday in the Office of Readings. St. Bernard talks about “a threefold coming of the Lord.” In so much of what we do, we look back to the past, we look forward to the future, and we look at the present to try to make some sense of it all. In terms of salvation history, we try to make both the past and future present in the “today” of salvation.

If we really enter fully into Advent, we might come face to face with our own sinfulness and grasp our need of a Savior, a need we all share. We might even glimpse an expectation of the second coming.

So today we hear a threefold summons: to throw off the works of darkness, to walk in the divine light, and to stay awake and alert for the Lord's return.

We are called to prepare for the Lord's return – or for our final hour – as eagerly as we prepare for Christmas.

MOVE

This is not something we can put off until we get the Christmas shopping done, until after the holidays, until we get a few days off, until we get the kids through college, until we get the house paid off, until, until, until. Now is the time.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. That's why we're in violet vestments today. We start a new Gospel cycle today – for about a year, we'll be hearing mostly from the Gospel of

Mark. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us to watch. Watch! Do not be caught unaware.

We should live in permanent expectation of his coming and be ready to welcome him. I know that's a tall order. But everything has consequences. Our actions have consequences. Our failure to act has consequences. If we fail to "watch," it will have consequences. This is a decisive moment. This is a time to be alert for those special moments of grace that come to us every day.

MOVE

I've known a lot of "interesting" people. Maybe that's what comes of being an "interesting person" myself.

About twenty years ago, I had a friend who had a lot of problems. Alcohol was just one of them – one among many. Sometimes, after a particularly bad episode, she would tell her daughter that they were "starting over." Her daughter finally asked her how many times they got to start over. Her answer was, "as many times as it takes."

Even spending a whole bunch of weekends at the Penal Farm for her second-offense DUI didn't do it. Her friends couldn't help her. Only Deb could help Deb.

Finally, one Sunday morning, after a weekend of drinking, she started over one more time. She called Lakeside. They sent a cab for her. She spent a month in their treatment program. Then she joined AA. Finally, after many years, she was clean and sober. She got married, retired and moved to the Gulf Coast. She stayed sober for the rest of her life.

For her, that last time starting over was the “one more time” she needed.

We have the same opportunity. We can start over, and over again. With Christ, we can always start over. As many times as it takes. We watch, we wait, and we hope. We fail, we start over. This is a good time to start over again. Today. Every day is “today.”

READINGS

Reading 1

Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

You, LORD, are our father,
our redeemer you are named forever.
Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways,
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?
Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes of your heritage.
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,
such as they had not heard of from of old.
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you
doing such deeds for those who wait for him.
Would that you might meet us doing right,
that we were mindful of you in our ways!
Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful;
all of us have become like unclean people,
all our good deeds are like polluted rags;
we have all withered like leaves,
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.
There is none who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to cling to you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have delivered us up to our guilt.
Yet, O LORD, you are our father;
we are the clay and you the potter:
we are all the work of your hands.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

R. (4) Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

O shepherd of Israel, hearken,
from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Rouse your power,
and come to save us.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Once again, O LORD of hosts,
look down from heaven, and see;
take care of this vine,
and protect what your right hand has planted
the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

May your help be with the man of your right hand,
with the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

Then we will no more withdraw from you;
give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Reading II

1 Cor 1:3-9

Brothers and sisters:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always on your account
for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus,
that in him you were enriched in every way,
with all discourse and all knowledge,
as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you,
so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift
as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
He will keep you firm to the end,
irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.
God is faithful,
and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel

Mk 13:33-37

Jesus said to his disciples:

“Be watchful! Be alert!

You do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man traveling abroad.

He leaves home and places his servants in charge,
each with his own work,

and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.

Watch, therefore;

you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming,
whether in the evening, or at midnight,

or at cockcrow, or in the morning.

May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.

What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”