

The season of Advent can be perplexing. With readings like this one from Luke's Gospel, I can't blame anyone for looking ahead to Christmas. Here we are at the beginning of a new liturgical year, the first Sunday in Advent, and we are eager to hear our favorite childhood Bible stories. But we will not hear about a star leading magi to a manger this year. We will hear only briefly about Mary's visit to her cousin, Elizabeth. We will hear about angels speaking eloquently to shepherds, but not until Christmas Eve.

Last Sunday, the end of the last liturgical year, was the triumphant feast of Christ the King. And the readings for last Sunday and for this morning share something in common intentionally. Both sets of readings center on the end times, the last things, the eschaton in Greek. But, as I pointed out last week, the eschaton will not be the result of a violent, confrontational war as the conclusion of all history. The eschaton will be the joyful *resolution* of history.

In the weeks ahead, we will hear a reading that has become one of my personal favorites. We will hear Mary's exquisite canticle, the *Magnificat*, and next week, we will hear of the word of God coming to John the Baptizer, son of Zechariah, a voice in the wilderness. But we will also hear John chastising a crowd of people as "a brood of vipers." This morning, we heard about signs in the sun and stars, and about people fainting from fear, and about the powers of heaven being shaken. Jesus points to his return at the end of the ages and bids us to live in active, faithful waiting, warning his followers to be on guard just before the plot to kill him begins to unfold.

Not exactly "chestnuts roasting on an open fire," is it? And yet, it is in truth overwhelmingly joyful because these are images of the culmination of God's promise to bring the fullness of life and love and healing to a hurting world.

God has promised that the culmination of history will be the complete establishment of the Kingdom of God. God has promised to resolve all time in a new reality that contains only peace and love and forgiveness and hope. A reality where there is no separation from God, no sin, no evil and no death. The end that

Jesus evokes in this reading is not the termination of creation but the arrival at a destination for which all has been created. For us, it is the outcome of our baptismal relationship with God—a glorious fulfillment of God’s yearning for all creation.

And so we begin this liturgical year as we did last year, and in every Advent season. We begin by reminding ourselves of the fulfillment of the purpose that lies ahead. You can see here in the chancel some of the visual symbols of Advent. Those of us Christians on the catholic side of the house love to use symbols to express visually some of the basics of our faith and our life with Christ. The symbols we associate with particular seasons of our life as the body of Christ carry heightened meaning. And so, recognizing that not everyone grows up with these symbols, we do well to occasionally unpack what the symbols express.

One such symbol is the Advent wreath, which Episcopalians have lit in their churches through the season of Advent for hundreds of years. The four candles on this wreath *do not* mark off how many weeks remain until Christmas, although that has become a common assumption. The symbolic lighting of an additional candle each week in Advent is intended to express progressive illumination. An Advent wreath shaped in a circle like this one represents Jesus Christ’s eternal victory over death. The evergreens are reminders God’s faithfulness to the people, even in death.

My family does not use an Advent wreath at home. We have a set of four hand-blown glass candleholders with natural beeswax candles inside made by a community of Orthodox nuns. We can arrange these free-standing candles in a line if we want to visually capture the sense of light moving closer and closer, becoming brighter and brighter as the Incarnation of Christ comes near. In any case, lighting a candle each week illustrates our trust that the Light of Christ is dispelling more and more and more of the darkness.

To further heighten our anticipation of Christ's coming during Advent, the ancient church named each candle. The candle we lit today is called “hope.” Next week we will light the second, “peace.” On the fourth Sunday, we light “love,” and, of course, at the Christ Mass, we will light the Christ candle. The third candle, the

pink candle, is called “joy,” and it is fitting for that one pink candle to speak to us with a colorful reminder to lighten up on last minute shopping and social engagements, and to allow God to genuinely stir up our hearts in joyful anticipation of what this season is really about.

Another set of related symbols cover our vestments. The blue of the candles and the blue on the altar are more than simply background. The color blue is representative of both deep longing and of royal blood, capturing our yearning for the coming of the Son of Man, the descendent of King David. Dark blue conveys the natural color of dawn before sunrise as well as the shadowy world of the dead of night when light seems farthest away. What better way to express our willingness to wait with anticipation as we practice what Jesus has taught us?

Emblazoned across our vestments are elegant golden fleurs-de-lis that represent both the Holy Trinity and Mary. They are images of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, both fully human and fully divine, as well as images of the woman who perhaps best represents how we are to respond to God’s presence. Mary inspires us to consent to bear God’s loving, merciful and just presence in our own time until that presence comes in the fullness of God’s time. Today, these golden lilies may also evoke a sense of the celestial bodies that Jesus describes will be signs of what is to come.

Signs, that is to say, of the goal of our Christian life, which is to be drawn fully into the kingdom of God; to be united with God intimately, and with each other. The goal of our waiting actively for a new reality where war, selfishness and shame will be redeemed in a totality of peace, justice and love.

Preparation in Advent, you see, is preparation for that time when we will move into the fullness of God’s eternal reality, which we catch glimpses of now. In that day, when we will stand before the Son of Man, everything will be transformed. Yet even now, there is a larger reality for us to encounter as God prepares us to be drawn into all the hope, peace, joy and love that we can bear in this life. The fullness of life to come will be eternal and consequently deserving of our acting now.

Even seemingly small acts can grow into something far beyond what we could ever ask or imagine. Fostering a community of love in this world, such as our parish home at St. Elizabeth, is a tangible way of helping the kingdom of God to come about, whether it is helping to do the gardening, checking on the well-being of a fellow parishioner or making a financial donation. Taking care of *this* community of love goes beyond this world because wherever love grows it is stronger than death.

In our Gospel for Thanksgiving Day, Jesus said that if we made the kingdom of God and God's righteousness our first priority, then we would not have to worry. Committing ourselves to planting and nurturing love here extends our efforts well beyond our on chronological existence because we are participating in the very Light of Christ as it dispels more and more and more of the darkness.

Christ is the flame and we, each of us and all of us, we are the wicks of living candles.

So you see, Advent is not just a countdown to Christmas. Advent is our opportunity to recall and refocus on the whole purpose and goal of Christian spiritual life. Advent is our opportunity to prepare anew for the coming of the Son of Man with great glory by taking up a spiritual practice, by devoting time to prayer, by helping St Elizabeth stay vibrant. These are just some of the practices that expand our awareness of the larger cosmic reality that is, even now, coming upon the world as we now know it and that we will know more fully in God's eschaton.

In whatever ways you are provoked to prepare, be bold. In whatever ways you are inspired to act on behalf of the kingdom of God, be bold. "Be bold," Bishop Steven Charleston once wrote, "Be bold in what you believe, for God did not give you a timid faith. No matter how difficult the question, face it with the confidence of your conviction. Breathe deep the Spirit that surrounds you, stand on the rock of a Word certain, feel the hand of the One who made you on your shoulder. Illness, sorrow, conflict, fear: none of these can prevail against you. There is no hurt so deep that it can separate you from the purpose of God whose

love overcomes every challenge. And even if for a moment your hope wavers, look around you: see me and ten thousand others, standing in prayer beside you.<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Charleston, Steven. *Hope as Old as Fire: A Spiritual Diary*. Oklahoma City, OK: Red Moon Publications, 2012.