

First Sunday of Advent – B
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Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
03 December 2017

Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7
Psalm 80
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
(Psalm 85:8) Mark 13:33-37

We Need a Savior

Today is the First Sunday of Advent; the beginning of our new liturgical year for 2018. During these next four weeks we prepare to welcome Jesus Christ, the Newborn King, into our world on Christmas Day.ⁱ But the reading from the Gospel this morning might seem like it doesn't quite fit into the mood that we might expect for the Season of Advent.

These weeks after Thanksgiving are busy and full with many good things that are part of preparing to celebrate Christmas: buying thoughtful gifts; planning gatherings with family and friends; traveling to meet loved ones. These good things can also be stressful, so it's important to set aside moments for reflecting on what we are preparing for. Here at church is one of the places we expect to find that refuge and peacefulness during this season of busy preparation. Yet, every year, the Gospel reading on the First Sunday of Advent brings a message that is more alarming than it is peaceful.ⁱⁱ

The scene for this First Sunday of Advent was the Mount of Olives, just across the valley from the Temple in Jerusalem.ⁱⁱⁱ It was just a few days before Jesus would enter into His Paschal Mystery: His Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension.^{iv} Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Jesus what it was going to be like at the end times.^v In His response, Jesus gave them – gave all of us – a message of warning.^{vi} It was not a message of peaceful preparation for something to come someday in the future. It was a message of being watchful and alert for something that could come at any moment.^{vii}

So why, in this season, are we hearing from Jesus on the last few days of His life on earth? Why are we hearing from Him about something that will happen after His Death, Resurrection, and Ascension? This message seems more appropriate for Holy Week and preparing for the Easter Triduum, doesn't it? What do His last days have to do with our current preparation for celebrating His Birth; His first days in our world?

The reading of this Gospel at the beginning of Advent demonstrates the close connection between His Birth and His Death. And it is this close connection that we profess together each Sunday in the Creed^{viii}:

...for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
...was incarnate of the Virgin Mary...
For our sake he was crucified...
he suffered death...
and rose again on the third day...

He was born, crucified, died, and rose again – all for our salvation. At the beginning of this Advent – at the beginning of our preparation for this Christmas – we hear this particular Gospel proclaimed so that we might recognize and keep in mind why Jesus Christ came down from Heaven. Jesus' purpose for being born into our world was simply because we need a Savior.^{ix}

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Ludwig Feuerbach was a 19th-century German philosopher who was raised in the Lutheran faith, but eventually became an atheist. He developed his Theory of Projection, which claimed that God was not real but was merely a projection; that we human beings made up God as a projection of our own good characteristics and desires; that this “projected” God was a bigger, better version of who we wished we could be.^x He argued that the problem with religion is that “it prevents us humans from taking responsibility for the challenges that face us.”^{xi} That,

rather than take responsibility for ourselves, we expect God to save us. Feuerbach didn't believe we needed a Savior – he believed that we had the power to save ourselves.

Although thousands of years of human history have provided ample evidence that we cannot save ourselves, part of Feuerbach's argument does have some merit. He is right, we cannot expect God to swoop down into the world, fix everything that we've destroyed, and then save us from our own destruction. We cannot simply behave badly as if there were no consequences and then expect God to save us despite ourselves. We have to be active participants; we have to take some responsibility for our salvation.^{xii}

But this is where we differ from Feuerbach. Taking some responsibility for our salvation is not the same thing as believing we can save ourselves. Taking some responsibility means that we cooperate with God and the salvation He freely offers us to each one of us through His Son, Jesus Christ.^{xiii} It means we have faith in what God has revealed to us through the life of Jesus Christ; we have hope in the promise of salvation and everlasting life that Jesus Christ won for us on the Cross; and we do the things it takes to not only prepare to welcome the love of Jesus Christ into our hearts – but also watch for the all the ways He is already present to us with His loving mercy.^{xiv}

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This is one of the most important ways to prepare for Jesus Christ to come into our hearts at Christmas – and to prepare for His Second Coming at the end of time – to be watchful for all the ways that He is already making Himself present to us today. That starts right here at Mass in three important ways.^{xv} One, He is present in all of us gathered here together as the Body of Christ. Two, He is present in His Word – the Scripture readings – when we hear Him speak to us about His plan to save us. Three, He is especially present to us in the Eucharist.^{xvi} When we eat

His Body and Blood in the Eucharist, it isn't so much regular food that becomes part of us, as much as it is heavenly food that conforms our very selves to be more like Jesus Christ.^{xvii} As we prepare for Christ's coming at Christmas during these weeks of Advent – let's be sure to make coming to Sunday Mass each week a priority for us in watching for and recognizing His presence in our lives right now.

Similar to the Blessed Sacrament we receive here at Mass, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is also an important part of being watchful for Jesus' presence in our lives today. In Reconciliation, Jesus is present to us in the priest who hears our Confession and in the words of mercy and forgiveness the priest speaks on behalf of Christ.^{xviii} Here at Holy Family Church we offer Confession Monday through Saturday; additionally we will have our Advent Penance Service on Wednesday, December 13th. As we prepare for Christ's coming at Christmas during these weeks of Advent – let's be sure that receiving His mercy and forgiveness in Sacrament of Reconciliation is a part of watching out for and recognizing His presence in our lives today.

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As we begin this Advent – this season of preparation for welcoming Jesus Christ at Christmas – let's keep in mind the reason why Jesus Christ was born into our world: because we need a Savior. We cannot save ourselves, but we are responsible for cooperating with the salvation the Lord freely offers to each one of us. This Advent, let's do what we can to cooperate with that salvation always being offered to us. Let's not only prepare to welcome Him at Christmas in a few weeks, but also be watchful for all the ways He is making Himself present to us right now.

ⁱ Matthew 2:2

ⁱⁱ Year A: Matthew 24:37-44 (*The Unknown Day and Hour*); Year B: Mark 13:33-37 (*Need for Watchfulness*); Year C: Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 (*Exhortation to Be Vigilant*)

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 13:3

^{iv} *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Glossary: “PASCHAL MYSTERY/SACRIFICE: Christ’s work of redemption accomplished principally by his Passion, death, Resurrection, and glorious Ascension, whereby ‘dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our life.’”

^v Mark 13:4

^{vi} Mark 13:37

Augustine, Epistle 199, 3, in *Catena Aurea: Mark 13:32-37*, ed. by Thomas Aquinas: “For He not only speaks to those in whose hearing He then spake, but even to all who came after them, before our time, and even to us, and to all after us, even to His last coming.”

^{vii} Mark 13:35-36

^{viii} *Nicene Creed*

^{ix} See Isaiah 64:5

^x See Ludwig Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*

^{xi} Edited by Derek Michaud, *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology*, found in “4. Outline of Major Works: *The Essence of Christianity: I. The True or Anthropological Essence of Religion*” (<http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/bce/feuerbach.htm>)

^{xii} See Philippians 2:12-13; CCC 1949

^{xiii} See 1 Timothy 2:4; Titus 2:11

^{xiv} Mark 13:33-37

^{xv} See *Sacrosanctum Concilium* No. 7

^{xvi} See *Homiletic Directory* No. 86: “The Eucharist itself which is about to be celebrated is, of course, the most intense preparation the community has for the Lord’s coming, for it is itself his coming. In the preface that begins the Eucharistic Prayer on this Sunday, the community presents itself before God as ‘we who watch.’ ... In the Eucharistic Prayer the heavens are rent open and God comes down. In holy Communion the heavens are rent open and God comes down. The one whose body and Blood we receive today is the Son of Man who will come in a cloud with power and great glory.”

^{xvii} See CCC 1392

Urban IV: “Eating wounded us, and eating healed us. Thus the Saviour says, My Flesh is real food. This bread is taken but truly not consumed, because it is not transformed into the eater. Rather, if it is worthily received, the recipient is conformed to it.”

^{xviii} See CCC 1448