

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 11/27/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, NY
1st Sunday of Advent; Text: Mark 13:24-37

This particular holiday weekend has ended up with too many competing themes. As I was grocery shopping on Wednesday, I bought not only the food for Thanksgiving dinner, but also the candles for our family's Advent wreath. We're just making turkey sandwiches from the leftovers of Thanksgiving dinner as the malls have welcomed the onslaught of Christmas shoppers and as it's time to light the first Advent candle. Like me, you may be experiencing some holiday sensory overload.

While there still may be turkey left, and Christmas decorations may already be appearing on our neighbors' lawns, in the life of the church, we've just entered into the season of Advent, and that's our focus this morning. Advent is the first season of the church year, beginning with the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continuing through the day before Christmas. The name of the season comes from a Latin word for 'coming.' The season is a time of preparation and expectation for the coming celebration of the birth of Jesus, and for the coming of Christ at the end of time. The collects and the scripture texts in our lectionary and the hymns selected in the coming weeks will, again and again, center on expectation of and preparation for Christ's coming – in history in the person of Jesus, and at the end of the world as we know it.

My son's girlfriend, who spent Thanksgiving and part of this weekend with us, wasn't raised in a household that included the liturgical calendar and the rituals that are part of the Episcopal tradition. I was pretty sure that Erica may never have seen an Advent wreath before. As I put the candles in our family's Advent wreath, in preparation for placing it in the center of the dining room table (after first removing the Thanksgiving centerpiece!), I imagined a conversation taking place with her about the meaning of Advent. I'd like to share that imaginary conversation with you, as I tried to force myself to get past the theological jargon that we tend to rely on in order to make sense of this Advent season. This is my attempt to articulate what is at the core of the season of Advent, as simply and directly as possible.

Erica says: Mrs. Roadman, that's a really nice centerpiece. But the Thanksgiving flowers are still pretty. Why aren't you leaving those on the table for awhile?

I answer: This actually isn't a centerpiece. It's an Advent wreath. Each Sunday in the church's season of Advent, a candle is lit to indicate which week of Advent it is. This weekend is the first Sunday of Advent, so we light one candle. Next Sunday is the second Sunday, so we light the same one plus a new one. On the fourth Sunday, we light all four.

Erica responds: So, it's like a calendar, counting down the weeks until Christmas?

I say: That's part of it. Advent means "coming," and Christians intentionally set aside the four weeks leading up to Christmas to wait in expectation for the celebration of the coming of Jesus in history, as a baby in Bethlehem. But we also wait in expectation for another coming of Christ in the future. Advent is actually about waiting for both, but because the celebration of Christmas is so big, the concept of a future coming of Christ often gets lost.

Erica asks: Isn't the second coming of Christ what that series of books are about – the *Left Behind* series - that seems to be so popular? Have you read those?

I reply: Yes, the "Left Behind" series is about the end of the world, and about Christ coming back as ruler and judge. And no, I haven't read those books. I started to read the first one years ago, because a lot of people were talking about it, but I thought it was so badly written that I couldn't get past the first couple of chapters.

Erica continues: So the authors of those books didn't just completely fabricate all of that stuff – they actually based it on something that Christians are supposed to believe?

I respond: There are Bible passages that talk about the end times, a final judgment, and Christ coming again. Based on those, some doctrines were formulated early on that became part of our creeds, or statements of belief. Some people who read those Bible texts hear them as literal descriptions of exactly the way the future will unfold. Based on those, and on what the creeds say, many Christians do believe that Jesus will someday come back to earth, appearing rather dramatically, descending from the clouds, during a time of lots of natural and human-made disasters.

Erica then asks: Do you believe that?

I sigh, heavily, and then say: That's a complicated question to answer, but I'll try. I believe that while the words of Jesus about the end times in the four gospel books, and the vision of the end of the world in the Book of Revelation are true, they may be metaphorically true rather than absolute statements of fact. We sometimes forget that no one was recording Jesus' every movement and every word while he lived, taught, and healed in the ancient Middle East in the first century. The people around him remembered what they themselves had experienced of Jesus' presence and ministry; they told those stories to others; and forty years later, some of those stories began to be written down. Each of the writers of the gospel books, who lived years after Jesus had died, were writing from their own particular context, in which the remembered stories of Jesus had new meaning and relevance for them. For example, we'll be reading a passage from Mark during the worship service on the first Sunday of Advent. Mark wrote in about 70 C.E., forty years after Jesus died, when Jerusalem and the temple lay in ruins and when Christians were being horribly persecuted by the Romans. It had to feel like the absolute end of the world to Mark and his community. So when Mark wrote down what people had remembered Jesus saying about earth and heaven passing away but Jesus' words remaining, those words would have been both comforting and completely relevant to

their unique situation. In that sense, Jesus' words are fully true, and have continued to be true, right up to and including our own time.

Erica, looking puzzled, says: I'm not sure you answered the question. Do you believe that at the end of the world, Jesus will come in the clouds?

I answer: I told you it was complicated. What I'm trying to say is that the Bible talks about Jesus' impact on a small community 2000 years ago. That impact was so profound that the life and teachings of Jesus continue to inspire Christians today. But it's much more than that. The Jesus of history, whom Christians believe to be a full and perfect disclosure of who God is, continues to be experienced as loving presence, as source of wisdom, and as empowerment for living a life of compassion by those who are his followers. Jesus came into this world at a particular time and place. Jesus has also come – again and again - through the church's initiation rite of baptism, through our celebration of the ritual of our communion meal, through our prayers and meditations, through our gathering in community, through our serving those in need. And, ultimately, at the end of our individual lives or at the end of all time, Jesus will, again, come.

Here's the bottom line: We believe that Christ's coming is light that takes away the darkness of our fear and that creates in and among us new life. That's what the candles on the Advent wreath are about. Christ is always present; Christ's comings to us are many, varied, and unending. The season of Advent recognizes that truth and reminds us to be aware, and to watch for Christ's comings wherever and whenever they take place – in Bethlehem, right now, and at the end of time.

Erica says: This may be way too much information!

Erica left yesterday without this conversation about Advent having taken place. But thinking through it has been helpful for me as I've tried to integrate the meaning of this liturgical season into my own life.

So I offer to you now the summary of my imaginary conversation with Erica: Christ, who will be present with us at the end of time, is the same Christ who came to Bethlehem as a baby, and who comes to all who recognize and receive him now and in every age. Christ's comings are always about new life. In this season of Advent, we intentionally acknowledge, celebrate, and watch for Christ's many comings. Amen.