

First Sunday of Advent

WATCH

“WATCH OUT!” Workers are repairing the roof and someone could get hurt.
 “Watch out!” The storm could make the roads impassable. “Watch out!”

Advent is here and we are to stay awake and watch. Does our Advent watching have that same intensity, that same sense of warning we hear in “watch out?” The images from scripture suggest that it does: mountains quaking, water boiling, stars falling. Here are serious, earth-shattering prophecies about God’s unexpected presence.

The early Christians believed Christ would return very soon. Thousands of years have come and gone and we are celebrating Advent once again. It is easy to understand why our expectations have dulled, why our watchfulness has ebbed. Yet when we pay attention, we notice that our yearnings are as strong as ever. Wars rage, family members endure illness, communities are destroyed by natural disasters. The times of suffering never cease. So we pray: Come, Lord Jesus!

Time, however, is not in our hands. We wear watches on our wrists and grow impatient with waiting. We watch the clock, ready to move on to the next thing. But to really watch means being present, living in this moment rather than longing for the past or waiting for the future. When we are truly watching, we regard time as a gift, a present. Watching becomes less about warning and more about attentiveness.

When you come together this Advent to prepare for Christmas, take a moment and watch. Notice the gifts of your fellow choir members, your director, and the texts and tunes you sing. Be mindful of those who sit in darkness. And then, bring your deepest yearnings to Christ and watch. God’s grace will come at an unexpected hour.

Trusting in Christ’s promised coming, we pray these ancient words:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
 and with fear and trembling stand;
 ponder nothing earthly minded,
 for with blessing in his hand
 Christ our God to earth descending
 comes full homage to demand.

READINGS AND PSALM

Isaiah 2:1-5

War transformed into peace

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."

(Ps. 122:1)

Romans 13:11-14

Salvation is near; wake from sleep

Matthew 24:36-44

The sudden coming of salvation

REHEARSAL NOTES

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Holy Trinity

PUZZLED

ARE YOU a puzzle master? Those that love solving puzzles gain such satisfaction when every piece fits together perfectly.

Right on the heels of the festival of Pentecost, the church celebrates Holy Trinity Sunday. The greatest temptation we face on this day is to approach the mystery of the Triune God as the supreme puzzle project. God is out there to be solved and we are the ones to solve it. If we can figure out how God is one-in-three and three-in-one, our faith will be secure.

When we come face to the face with the holiness of God, we respond best in adoration rather than explanation. Unlike a static puzzle, the holiness of God is a living, breathing presence that calls us into relationship. In this Sunday's gospel, Nicodemus comes face to face with the mystery of God in Christ. His response will be familiar to us: "How can these things be?" he asks. This born-again business is so confusing because he's trying to solve the puzzle, to have it explained. Yet the Spirit of God is calling him somewhere else. It is calling him into a relationship with the living God made known to us in Jesus.

Martin Luther describes the Spirit's invitation this way: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me . . ." (*Small Catechism, Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 1162). It is the Holy Spirit that moves us to recognize God in Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Spirit that breathes in us and through us, drawing us into communion with the living God.

Invited by the Spirit to sing the mystery of God, we pray these words by Herman Stuempfle Jr.:

How can any praise we offer
measure all the thanks we owe?
Take our hearts and hands and voices—
gifts of love we can bestow.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Triune God, to you we sing!

Last Sunday after Pentecost— Lectionary 34—Christ the King

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

AT THE end of a calendar year, we take stock of the year gone by. The media gives us many ways to do this: news magazines highlight the year's pivotal events, radio stations rank the year's best songs, and book stores feature the year's bestsellers. All serve a common purpose: to make sense of this year as it compares to years past and years yet to come. We look back so that we can look ahead.

This Sunday, Christ the King, marks the end of the church's year. How do we take stock? Strangely enough, by looking ahead. Two of Sunday's scripture readings are apocalyptic, a word meaning revelation. This future-oriented biblical genre abounds with fanciful images of clouds and fire, thrones, and creatures of many kinds. There are battles and earthquakes, but good ultimately triumphs over evil.

Sometimes such passages arouse fear about the end of time, when the intent is exactly the opposite. The book of Revelation, in particular, makes the case for our ultimate hope. God in Christ reigns over all evil: past, present, and future. We look ahead with hope because we know the rest of the story. Death is defeated and all creation is made new.

Do you call your choir practice a rehearsal? The Reign of Christ rehearses the Christian story, beginning at the final measure. We know that in Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, time as we know it is rearranged. The beginning is the end; the end is the beginning. May we sing boldly of the one who reigns in our time and beyond time.

We pray in the words of a well-known hymn:

Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations,
Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,
now and forevermore be thine!

READINGS AND PSALM

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

The coming one rules over all

Psalm 93

Ever since the world began, your throne has been established. (Ps. 93:2)

Revelation 1:4b-8

Christ, the ruler of the earth

John 18:33-37

The kingdom of Christ

SEMICONTINUOUS READING AND PSALM

2 Samuel 23:1-7

The just ruler like morning light

Psalm 132:1-12 [13-18]

Let your faithful people sing with joy. (Ps. 132:9)

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