

Weekend of Sunday, December 3, 2017
1st Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: Matthew 4:12-23
Sermon Title: “Tear Open the Heavens and Come”

Theme

In today’s reading, Jesus encourages his followers to look forward to the day when he returns in power and glory to end all suffering.

Text

[Jesus said:] ²⁴“In those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.

²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Sermon

I am glad to be back from the Abbey and to be with you. I say that because the last time I was there, I was 23 years less experienced about life and was only a second year seminary student. I knew little about religion past my own lifelong Lutheranism, and I didn't even know that much about Lutheranism. So I was quite impressed 23 years ago to do such a radical thing as I did, and I learned a lot. To some degree, the experience then shaped me. Even my personal vestments were tribute to the Trappist's scapula.

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But this time, I had a different experience.

- 1) I know more about ministry and religion having been ordained 20 years now.
- 2) I've experienced it before – the Abbey of Gethsemani that is. This time I looked with a more critical eye.
- 3) Things change, even in a monastery. All but four of the brothers I had met and worked with and got to know are dead. The old Abbot now lives in Rome, and Brother Elias is now the Abbot. Brother James is still there and was the retreat master so I was allowed to talk to him. And Brother Luke is still the organist and I accidentally bumped into him once.
- 4) But 4, the most disappointing change is that retreatants are no longer welcome beyond the cloister wall. Advent is their busy season and so I anticipated working with them, like I did 23 years ago, but Abbott Elias's opinion, according to Brother James, is that interaction between retreatants and monks is counter to the what each are there for.

When I made retreat in 1994, I was able to meet and talk with then Abbott Timothy. Emboldened by that experience I asked to meet with Abbott Elias. With last week's sermon from Matthew 25 about small Christ-like gestures, I wanted his permission to visit their infirmary. Sick and aged monks probably did not get many visitors, I thought. But I was not even able to see the Abbott.

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So what was left to do? Fully retreat. The weather was beautiful, clear and 65 degrees on Tuesday and Wednesday, so I hiked the grounds including up Cross Knob. It's not mountain climbing but, it ain't for sissies. That was probably my last trip up there.

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And I read and prayed. As I mentioned last weekend, the monks live out what is called the Divine Office; seven prayer services beginning at 3:15 AM and concluding at 7:30 PM.

And there is something I noticed about the prayer services themselves that I did not notice before. Yes, the prayer services are very quiet and reverent with enough built in silence to given Joan hives, and beautiful in the way the monks worship. But each one sounded the same, although they were not. And although they have handouts for each service, they don't care one bit about inclusivity – worship and prayer at the Abbey is for them, the monks. But I would say the same thing about any Catholic church. The presider calls and the congregation responds and the words are very similar to ours but not exactly and they aren't written down – anywhere! Speaking only for myself, the rest of us were merely spectators separated by numerous signs that said, “Monastic Area, Do Not Enter.”

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But I would also say this about their worship and prayer: it is monotonous and joyless, and so I missed you and our worship which Joan and I try to make ever-fresh and joyful; after all, gospel means *good news*.

If you want to know more about my experience, come see me. I would like to move on to the sermon for today that is shaped somewhat by my experience last week.

I have always thought the readings for Advent are dreary. Is it just me, or does it sound like that to you too?

The first reading is from Isaiah, of course. Three of the four first readings during Advent are from Isaiah, and that is appropriate because Israel had been living in exile, scattered all over the known world. A little history of Israel will clarify.

Briefly, after David and Solomon, the nation of Israel split into the northern tribe of Israel and the southern tribe of Judah. This did not please the Lord. Jerusalem, David's Holy City and the home of the Temple was in Jerusalem and Jerusalem was in Judah.

Furthermore, the southern tribe of Judah maintained descendants of David on their throne. The northern tribe of Israel did not want their people making pilgrimage to Jerusalem to make sacrifice, so they created two of their own temples at Bethel and Dan. This did not please the LORD. Furthermore, since the division happened along tribal lines, there were no heirs of David in Israel to put on the throne. This did not please the LORD. There was a tenuous peaceful relationship between north and south for a while, but either one of them would have sold out the other, and actually did. Under the evil Babylonians, Israel crumbled first, but later Judah did too. And the Babylonians maintained power by scattering those they had conquered in what is called the diaspora. This was an effective method of breaking down national and familial lines, and over the hundreds of years that this took place, traditions and religions did, in fact, fade away.

Back to the First Reading; Isaiah the prophet and priest called out to the LORD, ^{64:1} "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." He is frustrated with his own lot and the lot of his people. Though he knows historically that God demonstrated his mighty powers in days gone by, he now acknowledges that the voice of the LORD has not been heard in a long time. Isaiah acknowledges that the

people have sinned and not done what was right by the LORD. He acknowledges that the LORD has hidden his face from the people, and so he calls out to the LORD for help. Yet he concludes with this beautiful metaphor;

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⁸Yet, you O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are the potter;
We are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are your people.

Isaiah speaks for his people. He is desperate, he is pleading because he knows that life will only get better when the LORD comes back.

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Back to my monastery experience for a moment; Brother James, is really the only monk I got to speak to. He is 80 and has been cloistered since he was 18 years old. I asked him respectfully, “Sir, how do you do it? Nothing changes day in and day at and everything is at such a slow place.” He said some words about the honor of being able to praise God all day and praying on behalf of the world. But then he admitted, many of the old monks who still shuffle in to worship bent over from the years, look forward to death as the culmination of their lives.

Well, yea, sure, but what about abundant life now, as Jesus said? He smiled and said, “Who said our life in not full?”

Isaiah wants an abundant life for himself and his people. And so he pleads with the LORD to ^{64:1} “Tear open the heavens and come down.”

And the gospel reading from Mark could be seen as equally discouraging. By context, Mark 13 comes during Holy Week, probably Tuesday. Jesus has had one

testy encounter after another with his adversaries who are scheming against him and he knows it. He knows that Jerusalem, the sight of this passage, is the place that kills its prophets. All this and what lay ahead for him contributes to his melancholy.

So, he and his disciples were walking through the Holy City when his disciples notice the big and beautiful stones that form the walls of the Temple and the Temple mount and comment. Jesus replied offhandedly, ^{13:2} “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” And he went on like that up to and including today’s gospel reading.

Way to go Jesus! It’s the Passover! The town is full of worshipers. There *was* a festive atmosphere. Way to bring it down.

I had this particular scapular designed for this particular reading. The kids up north call it my Buzz Light Year vestment. I call it *chaos in the cosmos* because according to Jesus that is what we will have before his return.

So I hope you have gotten a good jump on your holiday decorating and shopping because it could get really dodgy out there! And Merry Christmas!

Seriously! When my staff and I met to discuss Advent I told them I was determined to make this a joyful, hopeful, time. How am I doing so far?

Well, here is the thing. Like the point Abbot Elias made about interaction between monk and retreatant seemed to run counter to what we are there for, the reason we are here celebrating Advent is not as a reminder that Christmas is coming. Advent is not the warm up act for Christmas. On the contrary, Jesus said he is going to return at the end of the age and so the season of Advent is a way to remind ourselves to get ready. Not ready for Christmas, well, unless by Christmas, you mean the Lord’s promised return.

And how do we do that? I am so glad you asked.

The apostle Paul told us in the Second Reading, in which he said, through our good discipleship we are being strengthened day by day so that we may be found blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Blameless? Really?

Really! If we pray every day confessing our shortcomings and ask God for the good gifts of the Spirit, he will both forgive and strengthen us, and we will be ready.

I don't know if I have achieved my goal of making this first week of Advent a joyful, hopeful time or not. You will be the judge. But I have told you how to be ready. Ready for the Lord's return.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

My Raisin' the Bar Challenge this week is this; there is no greater time than the present, this beginning of the season of Advent to prepare ourselves to be found blameless, yes, blameless on the day of the Lord. He is coming. He promised. I don't know when, but we want to be ready. And we can do that by enhancing our discipleship, devoting ourselves to confession and prayer and asking God for the good gifts of the Spirit. Then, should the Lord return, we will be ready. And that is good news. Joyful and happy are we who will be ready.

Prayer

Tear Open the Heavens Lord Christ and Come. By your merciful protection awaken us to the threatening dangers of our sins. Inspire us to prepare for your promised coming by causing us to search our hearts and reject any evil in ourselves. Through our confession, keep us blameless until the coming of your new day. We pray this on your name. Amen