

Advent 1, December 1, 2019

(Mt 24:36-44; Ps 122; Is 2:1-5; Rom 13:11-14)

Once upon a time I believed that you had to be awake when Jesus comes again or you'd be out of luck. You'd be the one left behind. That wasn't a very user-friendly interpretation of the Bible. As a young adult in the early 1970's, I used to wrestle with it.

I couldn't possibly stay awake all the time. What if I stayed up late and slept in the next morning, and Jesus was about to return? What if Jesus returned while I was arguing with my sister (something we've never really outgrown)? What if Jesus came when I was just in a funk, not thinking about him at all?

Thank God I learned a better way to understand the Bible! Thank God I learned that faith isn't a set of rules you have to follow minute by minute, but rather a way of life oriented towards God. Thank God I learned to trust that *he* is always seeking *me*, even in those times when I forget him.

The Hebrew Bible—what we call the Old Testament—formed every aspect of Jewish life. It was the word of the Lord as revealed to prophets, judges, kings, historians, wise men, and teachers.

These words governed not only the practices of their faith, but also their government; family and social life; relationships; culture; how they planted crops and wore their beards and wove their cloth. Their whole life was centered on the sovereignty of their God.

So it's no surprise that a lot of scripture passages center on the focal point of their faith: Jerusalem. Today's readings from Psalm 122 and Isaiah lift up the importance of God's holy city, Mt. Zion, the place where the Hebrews believed God physically dwelt, in the inner sanctum—the Holy of Holies—of the temple.

Listen to the words of Isaiah: **Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.**

Listen to words from Psalm 122: **I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord. . . to praise the name of the Lord.**

Every Jew, male and female, child and adult, yearned to visit the holy city at least once in their lifetime. Those who lived close enough would go as often as they could for the high holy days: Passover, Pentecost (originally a Jewish festival), Yom Kippur (the day of atonement). Their whole lives were oriented towards Jerusalem, which drew them as a candle draws a moth.

But it wasn't only so they could go and worship the Lord. Their *entire lives* were shaped by their experience of God, the Almighty Holy One, in the city of his glory. It was there they learned God's commands for *peace*, not war.

Isaiah said it: **They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.**

And this new learning of peaceful coexistence was their command for *evangelism*, for sharing the ways of God with the whole world: **The law—the word of God--will go out from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.**

For Jesus and his ancestors, back to the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, faith wasn't something they *believed*; it was the foundation of their lives, the way they lived from day to day.

Advent is the church's invitation for us to orient ourselves toward God in a similar way. The texts invite us to prepare for the coming of the baby Jesus, to be born not only in a manger 2000 years ago, but also in our hearts this year, this month, today.

Advent is the church's invitation for us to orient ourselves towards *the Son of God*, who will come again in glory—at some unknown time—to judge the living and the dead, and to draw all people—*all* people—to himself.

We Christians have no temple that draws us as a focal point. We're blessed to have God himself dwell within us. By the power of his Holy Spirit, given in baptism, we have the source of our faith like a compass in our hearts. *We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.* **Emmanuel. God-with-us.**

And the blessing continues to grow! That same *Emmanuel* who already dwells within us is waiting for us to come to him once again. The table of his grace is open for everyone.

Everyone. All are welcome, no one is excluded. The only exclusions are self-exclusions, those who choose not to come. I beg you, *never* stay away because you feel you're not worthy. It's this very meal of grace that *makes* you worthy, over and over and over.

So come to the table and be transformed. Be transformed once again into that which we already are: the body of Christ, cherished, forgiven, and eternally welcomed into God's strong arms of love.

Thanks be to God!