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The First Sunday of Advent
December 1, 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

In history, in mystery, in majesty

The Christmas tree is up in my house. The tree went up yesterday, though decorations were unwrapped on Friday; they would have been trotted out earlier, but we were away. This isn't a defense of the practice, just an acknowledgment of the fact. And so the season begins.

I'm not a Christmas scrooge, or at least I try not to be. Christmas is a commemoration of the time when God broke into history and became physically present in this world of ours. It is easy to despair of the world. But Christmas shows us that God does not despair of it; it is this world that God graced with his physical presence. That is, indeed, a cause to rejoice.

The season before Christmas, Advent, is a remembrance of that breaking-in of God, as well as a time of preparation for the second coming of Christ. We can say that Advent is a contemplation of Christ's coming in three different way: in history, in mystery, and in majesty. How we think of this Advent trifecta will affect how we act today.

Christ's coming *in history* was on Christmas Day, the quiet night in Bethlehem in which the Word became flesh, and the silence was broken by the cry of a child and the songs of angels. To claim that God came into the world in history is to say something bold and provocative. Sometimes we may tend to spiritualize God, to make God into a general principle or a claim about the goodness of creation. Some of those things might be true, depending on how we put it. But the point of Christmas is that God wouldn't be limited to spiritualization; the spiritual God became material in history, in Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). At Christmas, at a particular point in history, in a particular family, the creator joined creation. How glorious. How wonderful. How worthy of rejoicing. It's no wonder that we put up the tree and the decorations a month ahead of time. Why not? When you think about it that way, they should stay up all year long.

History, mystery, majesty. Christ's coming in majesty is the theme of most of our Scripture readings for these four weeks of Advent, including all four of ours today. The God who joined creation at the incarnation, and then, after his resurrection, ascended to the Father, will one day return, in majesty, as king. We often call that the second coming, the second Advent; the word Advent itself means "coming."

I saw a t-shirt one time that said, "Jesus is coming. Look busy!" But that gets it wrong. To anticipate Jesus's return isn't like a teenager worrying about his parents coming home early while he's in the middle of throwing a party. The second coming isn't a *gotcha!* moment. It might be a surprise, but not that kind of surprise.

To anticipate the second coming of Christ, in majesty, is more like if you're trapped in a burning house, and have lost all hope of getting out, then you hear the sirens of the fire trucks, and the shouts of the fire fighters, coming to get you out and get you to safety. It's more like if you're dealing with a debilitating illness, a terrible disease that causes pain and suffering, and every

treatment has been tried and failed, and suddenly a doctor shows up with the surefire antidote to restore you completely to health. It's that kind of surprise.

We use “king” language for this—Christ's return in majesty as king of the world—because it's handy and it's the best way we can come up with to describe Christ's authority over all things, such that nothing is too difficult for him to save: no house is too burning, no illness is too strong. We use king language because we talk about the ultimate enemy being death, the enemy of sin and suffering, and Christ is absolutely authoritative over it. We look forward to Christ's coming in majesty, with hope and expectation, not with a sense of impending doom, not if we love Jesus, because we know that he loves us first.

Yet, there are risks with focusing exclusively on celebrating Christ's coming *in history* and in focusing exclusively on his coming *in majesty*, such that we must maintain a balance.

The risk of focusing exclusively on the latter, on Christ's future coming, is that it could lead to a person withdrawing from common life. Someone might say, if Christ is coming to save us from a burning house and a debilitating illness, what's the point of trying to douse the flames or find a cure now? And so he might withdraw. But that can't be right. It is clear from the gospels that we should do all we can to resist injustice and assist the plight of the poor. Our world matters. Time and history matter. We know they do precisely because God's presence, in the incarnation, shows us that they matter. We know it because we read in the gospels how Jesus's own ministry was one of healing and reconciliation.

The opposite risk would be focusing only on Christ's coming *in history*, two thousand years ago, and paying no mind to his future coming. This is to limit ourselves to being citizens of the kingdoms of this world, which are all too often kingdoms of inequality, injustice, and indifference. On occasion the Church has erroneously described the culture in which it finds itself as a God-given one, baptizing the social order. (We have tended to regret that.) If the risk of focusing only on Christ's coming *in majesty* is to think that we are only concerned with the kingdom of God to come, the risk of focusing only on Christ's coming *in history* is to think that the current state of affairs is the right one, the holy one.

Alternatively, it leads to thinking that the repairing of the world falls solely on our shoulders and, if our track record is any indication, that's a cause for, first, disappointment and, eventually, despair.

Maintaining our Advent split focus on Christ's coming both in history and in majesty, the past and the future, is necessary to avoid either of these risks. One of the ways we can do that is to remember that Christ came in history and will come in majesty but comes today, even today, *in mystery*. He came in history, will come one day in majesty, but comes, today, in mystery.

He comes in mystery in two ways: the first is in the spirit dwelling in this community of believers who worship, fellowship, and serve in his name. Where two or three, or fifty or sixty, are gathered, he is in the midst of them. The Church itself is the body of Christ. The church members we like; the church members we don't like; our co-religionists across the globe: together, we constitute Christ's body, here in time and history, in a very real way.

The second way he comes, today, in mystery, is in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The word sacrament has roots in the word mystery, and even today the Orthodox refer to the Eucharist as “the holy mysteries.” It is mysterious, indeed, how Christ makes himself available to us in the bread and wine, but this is what he promised, and centuries of Christian devotion attests to its truth.

When we receive the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ comes to us and we show in our actions how even today we are both citizens of the kingdom of God, the kingdom to come, even as we are also citizens of the kingdoms of the world, the kingdoms of today.

History in the past; mystery in the present; majesty in the future. St. Paul calls us to remember that we live in this in-between time of mystery, and to act in a way appropriate to that

situation, with all the effort we can muster. In today's reading from Romans, he tells his readers that *now* is the time: not only the past, not only the future, but now. He calls it the time of crisis, *kairos*. Now is the time when we should set aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Now is the time when we should eschew quarreling and jealousy, licentiousness and rivalry and debauchery and drunkenness, because Christ came, and is coming, and will come.

This section of Romans is immediately preceded by an admonition about how to treat one another: with love. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Romans 13:8). Loving one another is how we show that we celebrate Christ's coming in history, rejoice in his presence in mystery, and look forward to his coming in majesty.

Avoiding destructive behavior and loving one another: this, it seems to me, is a good way to approach the next few weeks. It is a joyful and exciting time for many; it is a difficult and sad time for others who may be reminded of loss; it is frequently stressful for all kinds of people. In the midst of it all, love one another. Treat one another with kindness. Put on Jesus Christ, who came and is coming and will come, and who shows in his life and death how much he loves us.

We will be celebrating the Eucharist at the High Altar today, facing the East, as we will during the four Sundays of Advent. All of us—priest and people alike—will be facing the same direction, looking for the coming again of our Savior, with a sense of expectation and a goal of preparation.

In another sense, however, our whole lives should be lived facing East, looking toward our coming Lord, as we remember history and look forward to majesty. In our daily life and work; in our relationships with each other; in the way we speak to one another, care for one another: we should do these things with an eye on Christ, in a manner fit for worship, looking for his mysterious presence. Then, facing one another again, see him in the lives of those around us.