

Year B, Advent 1
November 29, 2020
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Restore us, O God of hosts *

show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.”

Welcome to a holy Advent! Let’s start with something a little different today, a prayer together. This is the Angelus.

The Angelus

V. The angel of the Lord announced unto Mary.

R. *And she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

R. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.*

V. Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

R. *Be it unto me according to your Word.*

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

R. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.*

V. And the Word was made flesh.

R. *And dwelt among us.*

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

R. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.*

V. Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.

R. *That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.*

Let us pray: Pour your grace into our hearts, O Lord, that we who have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ, announced by an angel to the Virgin Mary, may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Christians have been praying something like that since the 11th century. The Angelus is the story of this season. I don’t know about you, I need to bring it all down a notch. The volume of our world has been on at least eleven for ten months now. But help is on the way! The election and transition seem to be resolving if not resolved. Vaccines are about ready and vaccination plans are

being unfurled. It is a new year! Advent marks the beginning of a new liturgical year. We are in the year 2021, Thanks be to God. Good riddance 2020. Oh, and Christmas is coming.

I love Advent. Advent wreathes. I love the Marian blue. I have this beautiful stole made by an honest to goodness Eugene hippie. Advent is a fasting season, I love the invitation to turn religious practice up a notch, the invitation to pause, to wait, to anticipate the grace that is coming. The practice of the Advent Calendar is a favorite in our home. We do all kinds of different things. I know a few folks who daily meditate on Advent by coloring that Calendar in the Advent baskets. Or having a candy cane per day. Or trying out Morning Prayer for the season.

I also love Advent for its subversiveness. I saw Christmas stuff being put on the shelves at Walgreens at Halloween. Goodness. The proper way is, besides the Advent wreath, that not a green, not a single red bow or poinsettia, not one stave of a Christmas carol should cross the threshold of church until after Mass on Advent 4! All that goes up when it should: for Christmas! We make up for it, though. While the forces of consumerism and secularism try to plaster the Christmastide over Advent, their season ends pretty abruptly on Christmas day. We, on the other hand, small “c” catholic Christians, get to have 12 days of full-on bonified Christmas, not just one big, fat over-done morning around a tree.

We don’t celebrate Easter in Lent, do we? Of course not. A very basic wisdom of the Christian story is that you can’t have an Easter if you don’t have a Good Friday. For Jesus to rise in glory required His Passion and death. Our ritual, liturgical practice of preparation for Easter is Lent and Holy Week. Without a practice of the darkness of Lent, the light of the Resurrection isn’t as bright. Advent is no different, in fact it is sometimes called a little Lent. For us to welcome the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, to be prepared and present for God’s definitive arrival amongst us, we need to get ready. We need to be prepared. We need, as Jesus tells us in St. Mark’s Gospel today, to keep awake.

In an essay on the practice of Advent, Thomas Merton wrote, “The Advent mystery is then a mystery of emptiness, of poverty, of limitation. It must be so. Otherwise it could not be a mystery of hope. The Advent mystery is a mystery of beginning; but it is also the mystery of an end. The fullness of time is the end of all that was not yet fullness. It is the completion of all that was still incomplete, all that is still partial... The Advent mystery in our own lives is the beginning of the end of all, in us, that is not yet Christ. It is the beginning of the end of unreality. And that is surely a cause of joy!”

To this end, our Adventide task, Fr. Merton tells us, is to find Christ in the world, not as it might be, not as we'd rather it be, or hope it will be one day, but as it is right now. The truth will set us free, right? The more we know about how the world really is, how our own little worlds really are, how your little life really is, where you thrive and where you stumble, where the people around you shine and where they need help and forgiveness, where our world is shattered and what you can do about it, what you can't and how to tell the difference... that is Advent, our task in Advent.

Advent, our Advent liturgy is very scripturally driven. The readings appointed in the lectionary today and for the rest of this season are amongst the best the Bible has to offer. These gems of Holy Scripture are all stacked up for us, and in them is a very marked Adventide trajectory. We begin with absence, anguish and despair. On reflection we are invited to move into sorrow, a fitting response to the feelings we began with. Sorrow, when we take it seriously, can lead to repentance. And in repenting, reconciling ourselves with God and neighbor, hope springs eternal. Using the tools of the liturgy, following tis lead, we can be led from us from exile to home, from alienation to belonging, from loneliness to love, from death to life.

In this first week, we meditate on absence, ache, anguish, questions of where God is. This is Merton's "mystery of emptiness, of poverty, of limitation."

Our passage from Isaiah this morning is from what we know as Third Isaiah, this is the prophet in post-exilic Israel, they are back from Babylon, but all is not well. They were home, but everything wasn't fixed. Where was God? This passage, like Psalm 80, is a communal lament about how they ended up where they were. The anguish is palpable. And as is usually the case when we ache, we don't think clearly. Isaiah laments their sins, "We have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like filthy cloth." It is vital that we know ourselves, but then Isaiah goes and blames God for their failure: "But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed." Anguish or despair do not generally bring the best out of us.

Jesus then speaks to us in our suffering in our passage from what is known as St. Mark's small apocalypse, a section of the gospel that looks to the fullness of time that has not yet arrived. Quoting first and second Isaiah, Jesus tells us that "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light..." the very "...powers of heaven will be shaken." There is darkness, Jesus affirms that, and, like the fig leaves prefigure spring, there are signs of that help on the way. "Beware," He says, "Be alert... Keep awake."

So that is today. We're getting 1 – 2 inches of rain tomorrow. Maybe it is a good time to pause and consider the state of things, to do one of those searching and fearless moral inventories that our

friends in recovery commend. Maybe it is a good day to pray the Great Litany on page 148 of your BCP. Or go for a reflective walk in the rain. We start our Advent journey toward the light of Christ in the darkness of anguish, despair and lament.

Don't worry. It gets better. As we come to know how it is, to recognize where we don't align with God's plan, and we don't resemble the image of God we have been created in... When we realize that we aren't as good as we should be (maybe we don't even want to be that good), knowing that truth, that often painful truth of our shadow sides, our sinfulness, we begin to make meaning of things. When we are truthful, honest with ourselves, we often feel sorrow. Sorrow is not a pleasant feeling, but it is a reflective one. It is a reaction to experience, an invitation to begin to see what is not fullness, what is incomplete and partial. And, when we are intentional, this is an invitation to change.

Change. That is the third station of Advent. How does the old joke go? How many x's does it take to change a lightbulb? (I've heard it as Episcopalians, Harvard professors, colonels). So how many? Answer: Change???? What is the churchy word for this kind of change? Repentance. We see the brokenness of us and the world; anguish and ache. We reflect on the meaning; sorrow. With that knowledge, with the faith that God is with us, is coming and coming again, we can repent, we can change the direction of our lives. We recognize the difference between the world as it should be and the world that is and reconcile ourselves to the difference.

This then brings us to the final stop on our Advent journey: hope. As the angel told Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Nothing will be impossible with God. That is the perfect definition of Hope, and it is the precise opposite of where we started, which is anguish and despair, which is certainty that nothing will change, it can't get better, even God is impotent to heal you, us, the world. But no, as we prayed in the Angelus (which is found in the Gospel on Advent 4), "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; Be it unto me according to your word."

The practice of Advent is not to wallow in darkness. Particularly this year, we've all had plenty of darkness. The practice is to prepare for the arrival of Jesus Christ. And to truly appreciate that takes effort. Surely we could bee-bop through the peri-Christmas that Advent has become. I'll certainly have some days in that way; we all gotta fill those stockings with care. But in this particularly pensive year, with so much hardship and where we shouldn't going out unless it is

essential let alone travelling anywhere, I encourage you to take advantage of the mandated quiet. Make this Advent the beginning of the end of unreality. There is truly joy to be found in that.

Pour your grace into our hearts, O Lord, that we who have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ, announced by an angel to the Virgin Mary, may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

A blessed Advent to you. AMEN.