

**The First Sunday of Advent
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
November 29, 2009**

We don't have him in today's lessons, but I always think of John the Baptist when I think of Advent – he'll probably show up next week. Anyway, I remember telling a previous congregation, and I will tell you as well, that in my job as your interim rector that I see my role as being akin to the role of John the Baptist – that of preparing the way -- Preparing the way for a new rector, a new leader for Holy Comforter.

The analogy has some rather serious limitations. Those being: 1 – the new rector whomever he or she may be - will not be the messiah; and 2 – I have no intention of loosing my head over this job of preparing the way. (You may recall John was beheaded.)

Of course we clergy run the risk of getting the 'big head' more than we risk loosing our heads. I was cured of that rather early on in my last job.

I was calling on an elderly lady in a nursing home When I came in the room of this lovely lady she greeted me warmly and said something like, "John, you are the ...the new..." She couldn't get the word, but then said, "You are the new leader."

I, with some degree of smug pride said, "Yes 'maam, I am the interim rector."

She replied, very distinctly, "Well, I bid two no trump!"

I think she scored a slam, maybe even a slam-dunk!

You know there is a lot of theology riding around on the back of people's cars. We call these theological missives 'bumper stickers' Maybe you have noticed:

- **“In case of the rapture this car will be unoccupied.”**
- **“Jesus is coming, look busy.”**
- **How about “Jesus is coming and boy is he mad!”**

I always like that one.

While no doubt the latter two are written in jest. The first one – ‘in case of rapture’... --- this one carries the message that when the Second coming of Christ happens --- the persons in this car are among the elect that are taken up to heaven.

They are sure about the second coming of Christ and they are sure of their place in the division between the elect who are taken with Christ into heaven and the rest of humankind who are left behind to read the rear end of their car.

There was, a few years back, practically a ‘left behind’ industry created from the publication of the ‘left behind’ series. Maybe some of you have read some or all of these books.

I must admit I haven't read them and do not intend to, but they have been very popular reading over the last few years.

Throughout the history of Christianity, there have been numerous groups seriously committed to determining the date and time of the Parousia --- the Eschaton – the end of time and the Second Coming of Christ.

Some of these groups have been what we would call “fringe groups” out of the mainstream of religious life --- like the Branch Davidians of a few years ago. Some have had some rather embarrassing failures in making the sure predictions of the time and place of Christ coming again --- 1843, 1959 and of course the year 2000. You might say that these folks have been excessively Adventist!

All of which is my way of telling you what you already know: “It is Advent!”

Advent is about the coming of the Lord. Advent is made up by the four Sundays, and ensuing weekdays, proceeding December 25th. In Advent we anticipate the birth of Jesus and we also anticipate the Second coming of Jesus.

The church year begins with the first Sunday of Advent. Along with all other liturgical churches, today we begin our New Year with Year C of the three-year Eucharistic Lectionary.

In our first Advent gospel lesson, Jesus is painting a pretty scary picture: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations...people will faint from fear and foreboding...”

It is certainly a forecast of massive interruption to ‘business as usual.’

So we begin the church year with an admonition to stay alert at all times -- to watch ... keep awake.... To be ready, for no one knows when the day of the Lord may come.

While we find many examples of Scripture speaking about the end of time and forecasting the Second Coming of Christ, we can also find many examples of dealing with the here and now.

Perhaps as Christians we should take the position --- since we do not know the time and the date of the Second Coming --- that it is in God's hands --- And perhaps we are to live each day as if it were the one of the Lord's coming.

Let us try to live in anticipation every day. Living every moment to its fullest. Let us live in response to the love that God promises us in Christ, not in fear, but in gratitude.

I would like to suggest that we look at the life of Christ as a way of measuring our response to the present and the future.

In looking at Jesus' life, he did not tell those who needed him, "Just wait for the Second Coming and your illness will not bother you."

He healed them!

He did not tell the multitude "You can stand hunger for a day or two, come back tomorrow after you've been to the store."

He fed them!

What I do not see in Jesus' ministry is the kind of exclusiveness and arrogance that that is implied in the "In Case of Rapture..." bumper sticker.

Advent -- A time of the waiting and watching.

Advent -- A time of Anticipation.

Advent -- Living in the present awaiting the future.

One of my teachers at Virginia Theological Seminary, the late Dr. Marianne Micks – “Mixy” we used to call her -- wrote a book on the phenomenon of Christian Worship titled The Future Present. In the book, the point is made that Christian worshipers experience at once a summoning of the future and a shaping of the present.

Advent is that time when time must be dealt with in its fullness --- the past, the present, the future --- The fullness of time.

“Mixy” says “Acute awareness of time permeates Christian worship and the measures of time its language. A rhythm of past, present and future pulsates in familiar prayers and hymns: “Give us this day our daily bread...” “the hour is coming and now is...”; “O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come...”

We come together in this place, taking time out of our lives to be with one another, and in so doing we are also with God. In our worship, we take the ordinariness of bread and wine and bring them to the altar with the expectation that something special happens in the very act of bringing, in the act of remembering, in the act of asking for God to bless this moment.

In this worship “We remember his death. We proclaim his resurrection. We await his coming in glory!”

We live in the present, remembering the past with great anticipation for the future --- the fullness of time.

With that in mind I have an idea for a new bumper sticker.

“Jesus is Coming --- Bring him on!”

Amen: Come Lord Jesus!