

Sermon – Lex Breckinridge 12-01-2019

Advent 1

Mathew 24:36-44

Welcome to Advent. Now if you've spent any time at the mall or the big box stores recently, you will be forgiven for thinking that Christmas is already upon us, and in fact, has been upon us with its heavy, commercial weight, since oh, about the first of November. Yes, it's easy these days to miss Advent, but if we give in to that we will have missed something very important. We will have missed the invitation to preparation and readiness and **awareness**. That is the reason for Advent. Traditionally, we've found that Advent is that season where we prepare for the coming of Christ into the world. But what does that really mean? What are we really supposed to be preparing for, and how do we go about doing that?

On its face, our gospel reading this morning doesn't seem to have anything to do with preparing for the birth of Christ. Look a little closer and we'll see, however, that this text really is all about preparing for the coming of Christ. The **second** coming. Does that seem paradoxical? In fact, the scriptural tests read on the first Sunday of Advent are always devoted to a subject that many of us would prefer to ignore – **Judgment**.

It feels like we're preparing for the beginning of the movie by fast-forwarding to the end of the movie. But maybe this whole movie – this whole story of God being born into the world – this story of heaven and earth intersecting – the story where we see in the birth of this one man – and in his life's work – and in his violent death- and then in his amazing resurrection to a new life – and his ascension to heaven and now in his second coming to judge the world – in the narrative sweep of this story, maybe we're meant to see how we ourselves are preparing and being prepared for real life right here and now and for the life to come.

It's so easy to prepare for Christmas instead of preparing for Christ, isn't it? That's why on this first Sunday of Advent it is important for us to focus on judgment – God's judgment. I believe that God's judgment is not an event we should dread. No, I believe that the judgment of God – the judgment of the Divine source of life – the judgement of love – is an event we should welcome. God's judgment is about accountability. God's judgment is about clarity of vision. God's judgment is the doorway into new life. In his great meditation on agape love, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, St. Paul observes that "now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face". "Then" is the time of judgment. "Then" that Paul refers to is the coming of Love, the coming of that clarity of vision that will invite us to see who we have been, who we are, and who we can become.

I had a teacher in high school who I really admired and respected. A great teacher whose opinion of me I really valued and who I knew wanted only the best for me. One particular term in this teacher's course he offered us the opportunity to take our end of term examination in either written or oral form. I jumped on the chance to take an oral exam because, well, because I thought I could talk my way through anything, and the oral exam would last 30 minutes and not two hours. Now because of that unwarranted confidence I didn't prepare as well as I should have. The morning of the exam was about the longest 30 minutes of my young life. It quickly became apparent to me that what I had imagined to be my ability to make it up as I went along was not going to save me from being underprepared. I left the exam feeling pretty low. When grades came out a few days later, I had gotten exactly what I deserved. And I also received an "invitation" to my teacher's study. To say that I dreaded that meeting is an understatement. I feared that I had lost the affection and respect of my greatly admired teacher. I feared and dreaded his judgement.

I emerged from his study 30 minutes later with new life. No, my grade had not changed. After all, it was what I deserved given my lack of preparation. But the low grade was not going to be the end of the

story. My teacher gave me some insights and some tools that were going to help me become a better student. He offered me encouragement and he offered me support. It was very clear that his purpose was not to punish me for being poorly prepared. His purpose was to help me live into my true self—to help me become the good student of history he thought I had the potential to be. That time of judgement, that time of personal accountability, that time of clarity of vision, became for me a time of true transformation.

The story of Scripture – the narrative sweep of Scripture – is the story of a God who has loved us into being. A God who wants all his creatures to flourish. Just like my old teacher wanted me to flourish. He wasn't interested in punishing me. He wanted me to flourish.

So the idea that the God of Love, the God who created us in God's own image, would simply throw us away, throw us into the fire to be destroyed, when we misbehave- and we all do, don't we? – that's really not the God of Scripture- the God whose purpose for us is always redemption and new life. So why has God been portrayed in this way for 2000 years? Well, it's how the Church wants to control people, through fear of punishment. Let's just recognize that's the Church's issue. It's not the God of Love and healing and wholeness and new life we meet in Christ Jesus.

That's why God's judgement will always be both just and merciful. For God, justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin. They can't be separated. Justice without mercy is simply punitive. It's not creative and that is God's very nature, is it not? To be creative? And mercy without justice is empty sentimentality. There is nothing transformative about it. It's not at all creative. It doesn't lead to new life.

In the very next chapter of Matthew's gospel, after several predictions and parables about the end of things, Jesus says that when he comes in glory, he will judge nations by one standard; how they have treated those who are in need. He will judge the nations by how they have treated the "least of these". "Truly I tell you," he says, "just as you did it for one of the least of these, you did it to me." So it seems that preparation for judgment tells us to be there for "the least of these." It seems that it really does matter how well we care for each other.

So, how will you prepare for the coming of Christ in this Advent season? How will you become aware of that's around you right now? The prophet Micah has one answer for us. Micah in one very succinct sentence gives us a life's mission statement. He says, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God." I hope you'll think about that this afternoon, tomorrow and the next day.

It's not complicated, you know. Small acts of love that care for "the least of these". That's the way we prepare for God's judgement. That's the way we welcome Christ in his first coming and his final going. The outward action of mercy and humility just isn't that complicated. So let's get going. Let's hurry up and wait. Prepare and wait for the coming of Christ.