

**The Season of Advent:
Preparing to be Surprised**

Happy New Year! The long season of Ordinary Time is over; something “new” has begun, something different is in the air. We are in a time of big transition—in our church, in our society, in our workplaces—and we will all be affected by what this new season, this New Year, brings. One interesting part of Advent and our New Year is the element of surprise. Though we know there will be changes, though we know there will be new developments that will touch us all—there is an unknown character to Advent. We can’t be sure exactly when and in what way changes will occur—though we are absolutely sure we need to be prepared for them! How, then, do we approach this new season, this New Year, with confidence and hope, prepared for surprise?!

First, we can review the terrain of Advent, refresh our memory about the season we have just entered, the New Year we have just begun... Advent is first and foremost a season of coming—and not just any coming, God’s coming. We hope for this coming with great longing and expectation. We say we need this coming, for things are not right in our world. But, precisely because things are not quite right in our world, we are a bit apprehensive about God’s Advent too...for it will be filled with judgment, with setting things straight, with turning a lot of the world’s ways upside down. Since much of that world and those “things” in it are ours, we have a reason to be concerned...but our desire and need to set things aright is strong. So we hope for God’s Advent and with it a move toward peace, reconciliation, communion... even though we know there will be, there must be, consequences to pay the way things are now, and our role in all of this.

Because of the promise of and need for judgment—not just for ourselves, but for the whole world, because of this, the question of being ready, of preparing, becomes a very big piece of the Advent season. We are concerned about personal obedience, about prayer, about stock taking and personal discernment of what we have contributed to the need for God’s coming, to the need for change and transformation in this world. We are aware that God’s coming will be, as the Bible tells us over and over again, like a “thief in the night,” and we had better be ready, we had better be prepared for surprise!

If this, then, is the general character of the Advent tradition of the Church, what does Advent here, late in 2006 at St. James’, Le Jolla, look like? One way to see the particular character of Advent today is to look at our lessons for the day and put them in dialogue with where we are right now. What’s new? What’s still the same? What’s needed? And how, oh how, will we prepare for the surprises promised in this new season, in this New Year?

Our first lesson from Jeremiah lifts up the need for new leadership, an ever present need for all communities. But this text is not promising a new rector or a new bishop or even a new president of the United States. Rather, this lesson speaks of a messiah, a royal figure who will come to bring justice and righteousness to the land, salvation and safety to Jerusalem and the land. To read our newspapers and to watch TV, to examine the history of the Middle East, to say nothing of the rest of the world—all of this would suggest that we are still waiting for such a leader, we are still waiting for such a transformation of our world. And the longer we wait, the greater the disparity between this promise of justice and the reality of our world appears, and the more dramatic the

visions and the character of the cataclysm needed to transform this world through the Advent of God becomes.

Our lesson in the letter to the Thessalonians powerfully expresses the hope for God's coming and the great need for some changes to be made in the community of faith before this happens. The issues concerning the Thessalonians elicited prayers to "increase and abound in love for one another, and for all," and to "strengthen your hearts in holiness" so that they might be blameless at the coming of God... How well have we increased our love for one another and for all? And if we haven't...ah, at last we get to the gospel!

If the Old Testament proclaims a promise not yet realized and the epistle sets forth prayers for a way of life not yet lived into, the gospel warns of the consequences: a world out of control, a God coming to save the people, but only, only, if they are ready!" The description of a natural world out of sorts might call to mind the recent movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," with its blend of judgment and prediction at cataclysmic levels. There seems to be a lot of Advent in our lives right now. The dialogue between our scripture lessons and the present day testifies to the immediacy and surety of God's coming. Yes, despite unfulfilled prophecies and the chaos of our world, maybe actually because of them, God will come to set things aright. That's bad news for some, good news for others. But, again, how will we prepare for the surprise of God's inevitable coming?

Our lessons this morning provide an important witness to someone who would be prepared for the big transitions and changes promised in the coming days: our psalmist. . First, the psalmist knows to ask for help in preparation from the very One who is coming,

so prayer is an integral mode of getting ready! The psalmist acknowledges that God, despite the signs of the times, despite the seeming appearance of unfulfilled prophecies, despite the inability of humans to achieve all the hopes and expectations of God, despite all this, God is trustworthy and the psalmist, with no reservations, puts trust in this One. Pretty quickly, however, the psalmist asks, no he demands or begs, that he not be shamed and humiliated by God. This is not the prayer of some pious believer we can't identify with. This is the prayer of someone who is praying out of self-interest, out of concern to be a winner not a loser. This is not altruistic prayer; this is someone deeply concerned that all be well—and with him first!

Quickly, however, our psalmist asks to be shown God's ways, to be taught God's paths, to be led and directed by God. Trust for this psalmist is not blind faith or ignorance of present circumstances. Rather, trust for this psalmist means being open to instruction and teaching—wanting and needing to learn and to grow in knowledge of God and of the world. The love of learning is a help in preparing for surprise!

The psalmist calls for God to remember—both the goodness of God (compassion and love); and for God not to remember our sins and transgressions. In many ways this call to remembrance seems foolish: how can God not remember, how can God not forget? Unless, just unless, the call to remembrance is really more like a confession, an acknowledgement on the part of the psalmist that God is loving and forgiving, that from his youth the psalmist has been a sinner and incapable of living out God's will and preparing well for God's coming on his own.

How will we prepare for Advent, for God's coming? What will this New Year bring? In this world filled with so much need, we will do well to pay attention to the

psalmist. Being in a prayerful mode, being in a trustful mode, acknowledging our inability to live fully into communion and fellowship with one another or with God... all of this is preparing for surprise and for the coming of God. And, in many ways, the psalmist receives his surprise. By the end of the psalm the psalmist is no longer asking to be saved from shame, is no longer confessing his inadequacy as a sinner. Rather, this psalmist is now proclaiming the graciousness of God, acknowledging that God teaches sinners, even him, that he guides and cares for all the humble and lowly, that “All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness.” He has learned all this, and is ready. So may it be for us. Amen.