



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Zack Nyein, Senior Associate Rector

No Going Back

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 11, 2022

The Third Sunday of Advent

Based on Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

*My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
Amen.*

On this third Sunday of Advent, we light the pink candle. Not because Mary wanted a girl. But because today is Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy. A Day to rejoice, for Christmas is coming! But if we're supposed to be getting ready for Christmas, why then are we reading about John the Baptist in prison? The answer is that Advent is more than a season of preparation and anticipation for our celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas. It calls us to a kind of disposition—an orientation—a way of being in the world in the here and now.

Advent literally means "the coming," and the Medieval Theologian Bernard of Clairvaux taught that there is not only one Advent but three.

The first is the coming of Christ in history as the Christ Child at Christmas—the night when joy rode in on a donkey. And it is just that comical. The story is absurd—a poor, transient, brown-skinned teenage girl and her boyfriend from the backwoods, bearing the savior of the world amidst sheep and shepherds, one of the least-seriously regarded professions in their day. Our remembrance of the Christmas story reminds us of a God who chooses the foolish to humble the wise, a God through whom nothing is impossible; and we are invited to find room in the inn of our hearts for Christ to be born once more. We look back in awe, wonder, and delight.

The second Advent is the coming of Christ in Majesty. This is the return of Christ that we acknowledge in the Eucharist every Sunday when we remember his death, proclaim his resurrection, and await his coming in glory. This is the song of a Resurrection people. And in it we are comforted with the promise of Christ's coming reign, when Isaiah's vision will be fulfilled, when deserts will blossom, rivers will flow, and sighing will be no more: neither sorrow nor crying but hallelujahs forever more. In this second Advent, we proclaim that sickness, sorrow, depression, and death will not have the last word. Weeping and sorrow may last for the night but joy comes in the morning. We look up in hope.

While essential, these first two Advents each carry temptation.

An exclusive emphasis on the coming of Christ in history—Christmas—can easily lend itself to a shallow nostalgia. There's nothing wrong with Christmas carols and nativity pageants, trees, bells, stockings, ornaments and stars, but the incarnation was anything but sentimental. Our annual remembrance that Christmas is coming is a farce. Christmas came and Christmas went 2,000 something years ago. None of us were there. And even if we were, we cannot actually playact or pray our way back into the manger. Just as we cannot pray or playact our way into the good ol' days, whenever we imagine them to be in our

lives, in the life of our communities, our churches, or our world. Jesus is coming back, but pre-COVID times are not. The 1950s are not coming back. Before the divorce, before the diagnosis, before the accident, before the election—fill in the blank. If you're looking for joy in the way things were, you will never find it. Because there's no going back. Nostalgia is the enemy of progress and a barrier to new, true, and present joy.

An overemphasis on the coming of Christ in Majesty has obvious pitfalls. We've all heard of the street preachers and fortunetellers who try to predict the day and hour. Neo-gospel bluegrass artist Kate Campbell riffs on roadside signs in the rural south in her satirical song titled "Jesus and Tomatoes: Coming Soon." Jesus is coming back, so we can let the world burn. Few Episcopalians subscribe to a theology in which a literal second coming is paramount. Nevertheless, we are just as susceptible as anyone else to the spiritual temptations here—escapism, futility, self-medication. Lost in our drug of choice, be it substances, work, smart phones, sports, music, vanity. We tune out, we fall asleep to the very real world around us right here, right now. We become numb.

Lest we succumb to nostalgia or escape, Bernard points us towards a third Advent: the Advent of Christ in mystery. In all of the places Jesus promised to be present to us: When two or three are gathered, in bread and wine, water and words, spirit and in truth, in the last, the least and the lost. Wherever love lives. This third Advent transcends an imagined past and a tranquilizing escape. It invites us to stay awake to ourselves and to the world around us—the light and dark, the joy and heartache, the mourning and the dancing, as painful as it may be. In the words of one theologian, our hearts only have one valve: open and closed. When we open our hearts, we let it all in. We close them, we close it all off. If our task in Advent is to prepare him room, then we must stay alert. We must look ahead.

Pastor Drew Jackson includes in his anthology *God Speaks through Wombs*ⁱ, this poem titled "Alert to the Times." He writes:

Wake up! The hardest work is to keep
From being lulled to sleep. To resist the
Glazing over of my eyes and to stay
Alert to the times. These are tyrannical days.
Power is used in diabolical ways. Displays
Of allegiance will keep them off my back,
But they will remain on our necks.
So, what's next? This is a game of loyalty.
Who will I be in this moment of history?

Who will I be? Who will you be? Who will have our loyalty? To what will we give our hearts in this moment of history?

And who will this Jesus be for us? "Are you the One, or should we wait for another?" John asks from prison. According to Matthew's Gospel, yes—as demonstrated by his signs and wonders, all the ways in which the divine life is breaking through in Jesus life and ministry. Just as Mary sang and John prophesied. The blind and the sick and the deaf are healed, and the poor are brought good news. Jesus is the one. And at the same time, John the Baptist is not. Nor am I. Nor are you. That is in part what Matthew is lifting up.

There's a risk to staying alert as well. The more awake we are, the more we can feel like the world is resting on our shoulders and ours alone. We can convince ourselves that Christ's Advent depends upon us. None of us are the savior. None of us are the one. As we look ahead, we must also look around enough to

realize that we are not the center of the story. “For among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Still, I feel for John. He was the one who preached and prepared the way for Jesus and baptized him in the river Jordan. Couldn’t this God, who rescues the oppressed and sets prisoners free, come and set him free as well? Instead, his story ends with his head on a platter in a twisted political play. He pays the ultimate price for speaking truth and confronting the status quo—as prophets so often do.

Much like our stories, the biblical narratives do not always tie up in a neat, clean bow. There are loose ends, disappointments, questions, and longing. A mature faith is able to stand in the tension between Christ’s coming in history and his return in majesty—the already and the not yet—eyes wide open to the mystery of Emmanuel, God with us here and now, and to the risks and the consequences of following him in the world.

Everybody loves the Baby Jesus—the one we can hold, admire, cradle, contain. To quote the movie *Talladega Nights*, “the Christmas Version is our favorite version.”ⁱⁱ The one who cried, and spit, and cooed, and laughed in the manger never stopped disrupting our humanity with his. Turning over tables, challenging the authorities, eating and drinking with all the wrong people, welcoming the outcast, loving the poor, feeding the hungry, refusing to return violence with violence. Jesus’ life and ministry was an affront to the powers that be. Jesus grew up. He gave his all for love’s sake. He was crucified, dead and buried. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven. He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

Baby Jesus isn’t coming back. Let joy mature in us.

So, look back. Look up. Look ahead. Look around. Look within. Rejoice, for Christ is coming and indeed is already here. Not in a cradle or in the clouds but exactly where he promised: in bread and wine, water and words, spirit and in truth, hands and feet. Yours and mine. In our lives, Lord—messy, mysterious, magnificent—be magnified. Amen.

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ⁱ Jackson, Drew E., and Jon Batiste. *God Speaks through Wombs: Poems on God’s Unexpected Coming*. InterVarsity Press, 2021.

ⁱⁱ “Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby.” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, 4 Aug. 2006, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0415306/>.