

Memory and Hope in Our Cosmic Journey

From the sermon series on the Cosmos

Text: Isaiah 11: 1, 2-5

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Spring Lake, Michigan

Advent I, November 29, 1981

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Advent means coming. The Advent of our Lord has for us a double focus:

We remember that He came,
We live in the hope of His coming again.

Today we enter a new year - not a new calendar year, but a new Church Year or Christian Year. The Season of Advent comprises the period of the four Sundays before Christmas. It is a Season of preparation, a Season of penitence, a Season in which we ponder the mystery of grace in the first coming of Jesus and contemplate the Christian Hope, His coming in power to reign.

It is appropriate that we enter this Holy Season around the table of our Lord for this Supper is a Feast of Remembrance and a Feast of Hope. He instructed his disciples, when they broke bread and poured out the cup of wine to remember him whose body was broken, whose blood was shed for them, for us, for the whole world. And in his instructions to them, he called them to do so "until he comes."

Thus we are people who live in the time between the times.

In the fullness of time, Jesus came.
In the time of the End, he will come again.

In the meantime, we celebrate his presence with us in the Spirit and in the signs he has given, the Bread and the Wine.

The People of God are a people who always live by memory and hope. In recent weeks we have caught a glimpse not only of the immensity of space, but also of the eons of time in which our world has been evolving.

We have a past. We have a future.

God has acted in our past. God will act in our future. In this confidence we live.

We remember. We hope.

So it was with Israel. The symbol on our Advent Banner is a branch, reminding us of the promise which inspired the Old Testament prophet. Through long centuries Israel sustained its hope for the future Kingdom by remembering God's action in its past.

Israel was born in the Exodus, a great liberation movement which was annually commemorated in the Passover Feast. Each spring, Israel reenacted their freedom flight as the Passover Lamb was slain, roasted and eaten. In the ritual of remembrance, there was the note of expectation and hope for the day when the Messiah, God's anointed one, would come and bring to fruition Israel's dream of a Kingdom of grace and righteousness.

Through the long, weary centuries faith often grew faint and almost succumbed to numbing doubt and debilitating despair. Then she cried, "How long, O Lord, how long?" She lived by the promise. She clung to the hope of the coming One.

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. Isaiah 11:1

Listen to the description of this One Who was to come.

And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor; and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins. Isaiah 11:2-5

How Israel longed for such a leader; one who would take the twisted, the warped, the crooked and the deformed facets of her history and her world and usher in the Age of Peace and Righteousness and Justice and Truth.

And one day, when hope was about gone and the flame of faith was flickering but faintly, Mary had a child. One of the few still hoping, praying, waiting was old Simeon who took the child in his arms and blessed God, realizing that this was indeed the long-awaited One.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in

the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel. Luke 2:29-32

For Simeon, for Israel, their hope rooted in a memory was realized. Jesus was born; Messiah had come.

In the wake of that birth, life and death, a new community was born, gathered around the resurrected and reigning Christ who was present in the Spirit. And the story was repeated.

Just as Israel looked back to its redemption from Egypt, so the Church looked back to the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus as God's mighty act of salvation for the world.

And looking back to the One Who came and reconciled the world to God, she waited in expectant longing for His coming again to wind up the drama of history and finally establish the Kingdom of God.

Just as Israel annually remembered the event of its Redemption, so the Church regularly commemorates the event in which she finds salvation.

Just as Israel remembered her past and hoped for the future action of God in the coming of the Messiah, so the Church commemorates Jesus' death in the hope of His coming again.

That is where we are today — remembering, hoping.

In this Advent Season we take courage from our remembrance of the past.

Jesus has come.
God's anointed has assumed our flesh and blood.
Eternity has invaded our time.
Grace has touched planet Earth.

And we sense the excitement of John who had a vision of the glorified Christ who promised He was coming. Hear John's words...

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, everyone who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so, Amen.

And the coming Christ says,

"I am the Alpha and the Omega", says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

What are we to make of this promise of his coming nearly 2,000 years after this revelation to John? One need only to tune one's radio to most any frequency

today to hear announced the near appearing of our Lord, coming to judge the world. The schemes and descriptions of the Last Things, the End Events, are without number. This waiting from which we take our text for this message has been the victim of the most fantastic and bizarre interpretations. Dates are set, predictions are made, but still He does not come.

If already at the end of the First Century they were questioning, as II Peter tells us they were, the appearing of Jesus, then how much more must we, 2,000 years later? Surely in the light of 10 to 20 billion years of cosmological evolution since the "Big Bang," 2,000 years is a blink of the eye. Yet our time is measured in generations and 2,000 years for us earthlings is a long time.

Is it possible that, just as our expanding knowledge of the physical universe called for a new understanding of the Bible's references to the heavens and the earth, so *our present understanding of time is calling us to a new interpretation of time and eternity?*

Time and space are interwoven. You cannot peer out into space without going back in time. And at high velocity, time slows down.

For example, light travels at 181,000 miles per second. If we could design a spaceship to travel at near the speed of sound, we could reach the center of the Milky Way Galaxy of which we are a part in 21 years. However, what for us would be 21 years would be for those we left on Earth 30,000 years. Not many of our friends would be there to greet us upon our return.

Time is relative to motion. At the speed of light there is no elapse of time. Thus, time and space are interrelated, both integral aspects of our cosmic journey. But they are not absolute. They are relative. Perhaps Einstein's Theory of Relativity is calling us to a new conceptuality, a new model of Eschatology - that is, the doctrine of the Last Things, the End.

Behold He is coming!
That is the message to every generation.
That is the word for us.
He is coming.

Could it be that every generation lives on the edge of Eternity; that every generation is equidistant to the End? The End, that is, of this phase of our cosmic journey? If that is so, then death becomes the gateway to Life in a new dimension. If that is so, then death becomes but the moment of transition, the momentary passage into the Light of Eternity and the presence of the Lord.

And if that is so, then, my friends, we do stand always but a breath away from His appearing. And at this new Season of Advent the question is, are we ready? Are we so living that at any moment we are ready to meet the Lord?

Memory and Hope in the Cosmic Journey. Take the Bread and remember. Remember Jesus, remember the Cross, remember the event of Easter morning. Then reflect on your journey.

Where did He first encounter you? Can you recall the early spiritual impression of your journey? Can you let your mind have free wheeling for a moment to recapture the emotions of those times when He revealed to you His grace? Let your cosmic journey be projected like a film on the screen of your conscious memory.

In light of those encounters of Grace in your past, where are you now? Are you moving or plunging deeper into the wonder and mystery of Grace? Or have the wells of your soul dried up? Has the flesh of your heart, once tender, hardened and become encrusted with bitterness, made brittle with the acids of cynicism, despair and hopelessness?

And for what do you long? Where does yearning take place in your life? Do you believe He is coming? Do you believe one day all wrongs will be righted, all hurts healed, all dreams realized, all hopes come to fruition?

Come to the Table of our Lord.

Remember that which bread broken, wine poured out symbolizes. He died that you may never die, but live, live abundantly. Come to the Table of our Lord.

Hear the Word today — Behold, He is coming! Learn to hope again.

From this Table, with memory refreshed, with hope renewed, go to live fully alive, fully conscious, praying for and expecting with confidence and joy, the Lord Who is surely coming.