

Sermon Proper 27A Nov. 12, 2023

Fr. Nick Smith

Amos 5:18-24

Psalms 78:1-7

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. In a few minutes we will recite this part of the Nicene Creed together, and as I have told you in the past, “believe’ suggests that this is what we profess to have touched our hearts, not emotionally like a love song, but deeply as the truth. In two weeks, we will have again completed the cycle of the church liturgical year, and will begin again with the season of Advent. We will have another year of exposure to the anticipation of Advent, the mystery of the Incarnation at Christmas, the recognition of Christ as the Messiah during Epiphany, the confrontation and temptation of evil during Lent, the astonishment of resurrection at Easter, and the challenge of living as Christ has taught during the many weeks following Pentecost. We begin the procession again in a couple of weeks as Advent leads us into the cycle again. So, I have this question for you: Has all our reading of the prescribed texts, my labored preaching on them, the time we have spent together in worship, the time we have spent in common prayer, the sacramental celebrations we have accomplished during the past year...has it all made a difference in the holy recesses of your hearts? Is your understanding of the Christian way been advanced during this past year’s cycle? Are you able to recite this creed with more certainty? With more conviction? With more enthusiasm?

The information and confirmation of the Jesus Event, which we re-study each year, is not a fairy tale...or a fable. It is that to which Christians subscribe. It is, for us, the best way we can receive the truth of God’s dream. It is the best way we have found, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, to ponder the possibilities of God’s dream of salvation, reconciliation, and relationship. I am continually amazed at the efforts of Sunday School curricula and authors of Bible Stories for Children, who try as best they can to tell these truths to our young ones, for the truths are actually terrifying. In some ways they are more frightening than your average fairy tale. Almighty God became a human being and walked around among us, demanding particular behaviors, dying to underscore the importance of it all, rising from the dead leaving an empty tomb, and then threatening to return again to be the judge of those who followed the instructions and those who did not. Like all the Old Testament accounts of radical judgment, death, and destruction, none of it adapts well for children’s’ bedtime stories. Yet we are meant to integrate all these precepts and concepts into our belief system, to make room for them at the center of our hearts, and not only believe them but witness to them. And, since they are in many ways beyond us, even as adults, the best we can do is ask important questions, actually live the important questions. And, again, I ask you: have your questions become more focused, more refined during this past year’s cycle of inquiry?

Spoiler Alert! When Advent comes around again on the calendar, it will not just be about cute babies in mangers and stumbling awkward shepherds, not about Santa and tinsel, but about the continual threat of Jesus coming again to be our judge. The second coming is as much a part of our faith as the first, and we ignore it to our own peril and disassociation. The maidens in today's gospel lesson are an allegory for us, we who have, by our own free will, chosen to be the attendants at the grand procession of the Messiah, the anointed one, the Son of God, the Bridegroom to all creatures of this planet. The procession cannot be adequately held unless we are willing and able to carry his light, even in the darkest times, the midnight of the world. Though we might like to be compassionate and share our oils with those who are not well-enough prepared, we cannot let the procession continue without the light we carry, and carry dependably. The procession, the second-coming, the continual coming, is the most important thing. Once the procession has begun, it will go on forever, and those who have been foolishly unprepared will be given another chance; but for now, they will be unable to serve as attendants. Let's hope that next time they will get it right. Let's hope that next time they will wisely choose to be ready for the expected, but delayed, coming of salvation. Jesus, as Advent promises, is always coming to us from the future, and second-chances are allowed, but not recommended.

Amos the Prophet and Paul the Missionary have had their own revelations from God about the Day of the Lord, the coming of the Messiah as judge and jury, and we have heard some of what they have to say to their congregations. Amos has heard God saying that the festivals, the sacrifices, the liturgies, are inadequate unless they have been integrated into God's dream of justice, the love of neighbor and stranger, and the mercy which has, from the beginning, been at the center of the Hebrew code of ethics. When those festival partiers have ignored their original antecedents, then they are an abomination, and will be judged and punished. God has no interest in them unless they contribute to the realization of the grand dream, the right-relationships of creation. Paul, convinced that the second incarnation is pending, wants to make clear what he has discerned, that the faithful will meet Jesus in the air along with those saints who have already passed an ahead, and that a new life of faith and joy will soon begin. And, as our faith matures and becomes more desperate, we ask and live the question, How long, Lord, how long will you delay? When will you return for us at last? What more must we do to prepare? When will the grand procession, attended by the light we carry in our hearts, with lamps, on torches, finally begin? When will meet the criteria? When will we have integrated your dream enough into the courtship of our daily lives that the wedding of heaven and earth may proceed?

As much as the second coming is ignored or discounted, it is indeed the piece of the Christian puzzle which completes the picture and ties all of our personal relationships with God together. It is the final triumph over chaos. Has it been irresponsibly delayed? Are there signs, as Jesus teaches, which will alert us to its coming? Does it worry you? Do you fear being separated from the sheep into the goat corral? Or do you simply ignore the predictions or rationalize them away? Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die? I appeal to you, as your priest, to live these questions with enough care that you do not miss the grand procession, that you try to faithfully carry the light which diminishes the darkness, that you watch for the return of Jesus, either incarnate in flesh or apparent in spirit. Or both. And think of the possibilities which have been promised as you get you lives in order for review by the one who knows you best, Christ Jesus your advocate and savior. Amen.