

Sunday, 27 November 2016

The Three Spirits of Advent- 1

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew
24:36-44

Today is the church's New Year. The Church year always begins with Advent. Advent is a season that brings a certain level of tension. Our culture wants to sing Christmas Carols, but the spirits of Advent says "wait". Our culture wants to celebrate by eating cookies and decorating Christmas trees, but the spirits of Advent say "wait". On the way to church we hear Frank Sentara's voice on the radio singing "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas", and our heads are filled with cozy images of sleigh rides and fire places and hot chocolate. When we get to church we hear readings that prepare us for God's coming to us as the Christ-child (which we expect and hope for), but unexpectedly our readings also call us to repentance, and warn us to prepare for a coming judgement as we wait for Jesus to come again. It can feel a bit like Lent invading our Christmas celebrations.

Advent is a season that many of us want to "bah-humbug". "Give us Christmas", we say. But, the three Spirits of Advent stand in between us and Christmas.

The first spirit that will visit us is the Spirit of Advent Past. A man with a scroll comes to us- an old prophet. His scroll is filled with prophecies and longings. This Spirit reminds us of the cries of humanity throughout history. A history

that is filled with war, violence, disease, and suffering. This Spirit reminds us to not be naïve about the world we live in. This Spirit stands between us and our cozy images of warm fireplaces and eggnog and reminds us of the suffering of humanity. From the suffering masses there are voices that cry out with hope. The Spirit of Advent Past points to prophets that foresee a future that is better because of a saving God and a coming hero.

The Prophet Isaiah yearns for a time when the countries of the world will look to God for guidance

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4 He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.” (Is 2:3-4)

The Prophets yearn to be saved, but they also point to why things are so bad. They call humanity to look at itself. To us, who always want to find the problem somewhere outside ourselves, the prophets point to us and make us view the reality that we don't even live up to our own standards, let alone God's standards. The prophet's call

for justice is spoken in the midst of a human race that selfishly fights and claws to get their own way- even at the expense of others.

But this Spirit gives us hope by reminding us of the ways God has saved His people in the past, and that God will not allow injustice to persist. The Spirit of Advent Past points to hope, but it is hope to be saved from a mess humanity created.

As the Spirit of Advent Past recedes we see another figure come forward- The Spirit of Advent Future. This Spirit is mysterious and comes carrying a box. We don't know what is inside. We don't know if we should be excited or fearful. When we are sending Christmas cards with pictures of a glowing baby in a cozy looking manger she reminds us that this baby will grow to be the king of kings, the lord of lords, and the judge of all. She points to a coming time of judgement- when what is wrong with the world will be made right. ... Surely part of what needs to be put right is us. We don't know how we will stand at the time of judgement. We trust in Jesus, but we can only hope. He owes us nothing.

In many of us there is a little twinge of fear when we think about Christ's return. The preacher, Austin Farrer, said, "The God who saves us is the God who judges us. We are not condemned by his severity and redeemed by his compassion; what judges us is what redeems us, the love of God. What is it that will break our hearts on judgement day? Is it not the vision, suddenly unrolled, of how he has

loved the friends we have neglected, of how he has loved us and we have not loved him in return; how, when we come before his altar, he gave us himself, and we gave him half-penitences, or resolutions too weak to commit our wills? But while love thus judges us by being what it is, the same love redeems us." The Christ who judges us is also the one who loves us and died for us.

The Spirit of Advent Future points us to a time when the one who we waited for- Jesus Christ- will come again. Christ himself says,

36 "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. 37 For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, 39 and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. 42 Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Matt 24:36-44)

This Spirit claims that anyone who predicts a date for Christ's coming is a liar. Christ himself, like the church, does not know the day or time. The angels don't know. The first sign that someone is wrong is that they claim to know. We know it is in the future and so the Spirit of Advent Future points, but we don't know if she points to tomorrow or a thousand years into the future. .. She might also be pointing to the end of our life, when we will stand before Jesus and with him look at our lives. She stands before every generation and points to the future reminding us to be vigilant and prepared.

Another Spirit comes forward- the Spirit of Advent Present. This spirit carries a bell. She rings it constantly to remind us to be alert, awake, and ready. She reminds us that if we live in the present moment, full of the Gospel, full of Christ, then we have nothing to worry about, and don't have to be concerned about when that end might come. The Spirit of Advent Present calls us to be ready at every moment. St. Paul says in Romans,

11 "the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.
12 The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. 13 Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy. 14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." (Rom 13:11-14)

Paul reminds us to live now as if he will come today. We might pat ourselves on the back for not being involved in an orgy, but we should remind ourselves that the works of darkness include quarrelling, which is harder for most of us to exclude ourselves from.

The Spirit of Advent Present also reminds us that not only has Christ come in the past, and not only is he coming again, but that Christ is in our midst now. We are the body of Christ and he promises to be in our midst, especially when we gather (Matt 18:20). He says he is present in those who are in need and to offer them help and kindness is to do the same for him. To reject them is to reject him (Matt 25). Christ will eventually come, bursting into the world in an obvious way no one can deny, but he comes to us now, disguised.

As we go through this season there will still be those who 'bah-humbug', wanting to rush past the self-reflection we are called to in Advent. But I encourage you to remember the three Spirits of Advent. Remember the longing of humanity for a future filled with justice and the presence of God. Be diligent, knowing that there is a coming time of judgement. And more than anything, be present now- be awake and alert to who we are called to be in the Gospel, present to Christ now. If we pay attention to the Spirits of Advent, then we will be prepared for Christmas.