

3rd Sunday of Advent, Year B
Is 61:1-2a, 10-11
Lk 1:46-54 (Magnificat)
1Thess 5:16-24
Mk 1:6-8, 19-28

Deacon Bob Cassey
St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn
December 17, 2017

Today we observe the third of the four Sunday of Advent. Look: the third candle on the Advent wreath is pink. In principle, Advent lasts four weeks, but that happens only when, like last year, Christmas falls on a Sunday. This year, Christmas is on Monday, and so the fourth week of Advent is all of one day long: it gets chopped off on Sunday.

But even though we have only 8 days left of Advent, they can be 8 good days. Advent is waiting time, time when we wait for what is to come. We look back at the time when God in the person of Jesus had not yet entered into human history and culture, and we are grateful to live in a world that knows Christ – to a greater or lesser degree, of course, but if we appeal to what President Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature,” we acknowledge that our world is different because God became human in the God/man Jesus Christ.

And Advent doesn't just look backward. Yes, the birth of Jesus is an historical fact, a fact we celebrate. But Jesus continues to come to us today, first in baptism and then over and over again in Holy Communion. And that too is cause for celebration. And we anticipate in Advent yet another coming of Jesus, in what we call the Parousia. Do you remember the acclamation we used to proclaim in the Eucharistic Prayer? “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” That coming again, the second coming, is the Parousia.

When I was a young lad just learning my faith, the Parousia frightened me. Think about things you anticipate with dread. The principal has called your parents and summoned them into her office for a “talk.” The boss has invited you to sit down with her and go over some discrepancies she's discovered in your latest report. The doctor says it's time for your colonoscopy. Well, I used to think that the second coming of Christ was something to dread. We called it “the end of the world,” and we figured it was going to be nasty and painful and terrifying.

Today's readings say that just as with the first coming of Jesus, the baby laid in a manger bed, the second coming of Jesus is not something to dread; it is cause for rejoicing. This Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, from a Latin word meaning “Rejoice!” And rejoicing is what today's whole liturgy is about.

When I was just a little boy, maybe 4 years old, one of the men on my dad's staff called and told my mother to put me on the line, because he was going to play Santa Claus. When she called me to take the phone I burst into tears because I had just wet my pants

and, because Santa knows all, I knew that he was going to tell me that I had blown my shot at a merry Christmas: I was doomed; I was destined for the naughty list.

I subsequently learned that that is not what Santa does, and it's certainly not what God does. The Christian knows that God is not out to catch us in our misdeeds and our weakness; God in his mercy wants to sweep us up into his loving arms, wet pants and all.

The Gospels have been telling us for weeks now about the need to stay awake, to be alert, to watch, "because we know not the day nor the hour." Parables from the Gospel of Matthew: the 10 virgins who were sent out to greet the bridegroom when he comes, the master who distributes his assets to his three servants and then demands an accounting upon his return, the shepherd/king who separates the sheep from the goats. The first Sunday of Advent: "Keep watch, because you don't know when the lord of the house is coming back." The second Sunday: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight his paths."

The cumulative effect of these messages may be to instill dread, as if to say, "Jesus will come again, and gosh, is he ticked off!" Against that dread, we have today's Scriptures. St. John the Baptist is excited about his work, the work of announcing that the long-awaited Messiah is coming. Christ entered into the world at Christmas. Christ will come again. The Parousia is not doom and destruction; it's not the end of the world; it is the fulfillment of all creation. The Parousia will not interrupt evolution; the Parousia is the fulfillment toward which the whole course and trajectory of evolution is directed.

In his letter to the church in Galatia [*Gal 4:4*], St. Paul wrote, "*In the fullness of time* God sent his son [to be] born of a woman, . . ." *In the fullness of time*. How much fuller a time of fulfillment will it be when Christ comes again in the Parousia!

And so our worship today lifts us up in joy. Isaiah announces his life's mission with joy: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, . . . [H]e has sent me to announce a year of favor . . . , to bring glad tidings to the poor and to heal the brokenhearted." Mary declares in our psalm response, "[M]y spirit rejoices in God my savior. . . . He has mercy on those who revere him in every generation." And St. Paul, writing to the church of Thessalonika, exhorts them to pray, to give thanks, and above all to rejoice.

Advent is a time of waiting, sure. But it's not a time of dreadful anticipation; it's a time of joyful hope, a time of celebration. Our Creator sweeps us up and enfolds us in his loving arms. Our God controls the course of history and the trajectory of evolution. Everything is driving toward fulfillment and perfection. And so we join with the early Church, the community who pray at the very end of the Book of Revelation [*Rev 22:20*], the last book of the Bible, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Come, Lord Jesus!