

## First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2017 St. Augustine Cathedral

11:30 a.m.

First of all, I want to wish all of you a very Happy New Year! Now some of you might be thinking that I'm really pushing things----that before New Years, we have to celebrate Christmas which is still three weeks, and one day away! But my New Year's greeting doesn't have to do with 2018 that will begin on January 1<sup>st</sup>, but rather with the new Liturgical Year which begins today, on this First Sunday of Advent. With last Sunday's great Feast of Christ the King, we began the last week of the Church Year, and today, we start all over again.

You can tell that things are different: Advent is the 2<sup>nd</sup> shortest Liturgical season of the Year, lasting only four weeks; but this year, since Christmas comes on a Monday, the 4<sup>th</sup> week is really only one day. Also, since Advent is considered a minor penitential season, we wear the liturgical color of purple/violet, and we also omit the Gloria during Advent, as you may have noticed this morning. There's also the tradition of the Advent Wreath, which lights a new candle for each week of the season. And, by the way, that's a beautiful family tradition to carry on each day of Advent in your homes as well.

During this Advent Season, the Church focuses our attention on preparing ourselves for the Coming of Christ. Since Advent comes right during these days when we're all so busy with the multiple preparations for the celebration of Christmas----decorating our homes, shopping, sending greetings, shopping, putting up the tree, and shopping, the spiritual preparations that Advent asks us to focus on can sometimes get lost in the hubbub of all the other preparations. So, we have to really work hard to not let that happen.

Our First Reading this morning was from the Prophet Isaiah. He's sometimes called the "Advent Prophet" because so much of his writings and prophesying are focused on what he so frequently refers to as "the coming of the Day of the Lord". And that's exactly what we heard in this morning's First Reading. There are several beautiful thoughts for our reflection in this Reading; we could reflect on it for quite a while.

Did you notice that in the very first line of that Reading, Isaiah says something pretty revolutionary: *"You, Lord, are our father, our redeemer, You are named forever."* Isaiah had a deep and intimate relationship with God, and, even as an

Old Testament Prophet, he already seemed to know what Jesus would eventually reveal to the world when He would teach us to pray: "Our Father".

And so perhaps it was in that sense of that loving relationship that Isaiah was able to say to God: "*Why do You let us wander, O Lord, from Your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear You not?*" In other words, Isaiah seems to be blaming God for our wrongdoing, but in the way that we might say to our parents, or our spouse or a trusted friend: "Why did you let me do something so stupid?" but totally realizing at the same time that it's our fault, and that we are truly sorry. Yet, we say, as Isaiah says to God: Please help us, save us from ourselves.

But then Isaiah makes this plea to God: "*Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down...while You wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for: such as they had not heard of from of old!*". Well, what is it that we are preparing to celebrate at Christmas? Exactly that! God left His heavenly dwelling place and became One of us through the Incarnation. There had never before or since been such an "awesome deed" such as that God became Man! That's the meaning of Christmas! But it wasn't God's purpose -to remain as a Baby; rather, it was for that Baby Jesus to grow into our Savior, Who would save us from our sins.

So, what are we really preparing for at Advent? In a sense, yes, we're preparing for Christmas. That is the first, and most dramatic "coming of Christ"; that was the original "Day of the Lord". But, in addition to that, and really more importantly, the Church uses Advent to get us prepared for the Second/Final Coming of Christ, what the Church calls the Parousia!

That's why the Readings during Advent, including today's Gospel passage, have such an urgent tone. Jesus tells His disciples, and all of us, "*Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come!*" The "time will come" for what---for Whom? That's the Second Coming of Christ---the ultimate "Day of the Lord". Jesus came into our world to be our Savior; Jesus accomplished that Act of Salvation through His suffering, death and Resurrection. Having accomplished His mission, He Ascended back into Heaven, and has given us the Gift of the Holy Spirit to guide His Church, and to guide us through the Sacraments and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

But, at some point, at the end of all time---at the end of human history----Jesus will return again in Glory. And, as Jesus urges us in today's Gospel, we can't be "asleep at the switch" when that happens. After telling that brief parable about

the man who travels abroad and leaves his home in charge of his servants, Jesus tells us to *“Watch, therefore, you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow, or in the morning.”* We have to pay attention, because we never know: the Second Coming could come this afternoon, or not for another 1,000 years. But, we need to be prepared.

The Early Church, including St. Paul, was convinced it would be in their lifetime; that’s why we heard him tell us this morning in his First Letter to the Corinthians to continue to *“remain firm to the end as you wait for the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”*. And yet, 2,000 years later, it hasn’t come. But, it will come, and it might be today!

So Advent is about much more than putting up our Christmas lights and setting up the manger in our homes. It’s about getting ourselves ready for all the ways that the Lord intends to come into our lives.

Advent is all about “waiting”. That’s not something most of us are good at---practicing patience. During these days, perhaps the most impatient are the children as they countdown the days until Santa arrives---just 22 more!

Maybe the second most impatient people are shoppers who oftentimes have to stand in lines forever. I made the mistake when I went back to Pittsburgh for Thanksgiving of letting three of my sisters talk me into going shopping with them on Black Friday. They went to a Kohl’s and were willing to stand in one of two lines that literally went through the entire store for as far as you could see. As much as I love my sisters, I couldn’t do it, so I told them I’d meet them at the car one hour and 20 minutes later.

All of us need to learn how to patiently and joyfully “wait” in our spiritual lives as well. And for that, we need the virtue of Hope, to help us to move forward in our lives, following Jesus to the best of our ability, knowing that at some point---whether it’s the end of our lives in this world, or the end of all time---we will meet Jesus face-to-face and live with Him in glory.

And so, as we get ready for the Christmas celebration by shopping, decorating, and shopping some more, there’s one more thing that we should make time for during this Advent Season. We should make sure to make a good Christmas Confession, as a great way to begin this new Church Year, and to keep focused on staying close to Jesus and living according to His example and teachings to the

very best of our ability, and to be as sure as we can be that we are prepared to meet the Lord, whenever, and however, He comes to us.

Advent begins a whole new Year of Grace----new opportunities to grow in the ways we love those with whom we share life; new opportunities for each of us to make sure that we stay awake and are prepared for all the graces and blessings God wants to bring into our lives; new ways for us to heed Jesus' advice for us to "stay awake" and "Watch!" During this Season of Advent, and throughout this new Liturgical Year, may we live according to my own Episcopal Motto: Let us continue "*waiting in joyful hope*" for the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

God bless you, now and always.