

Cathedral Church of St. Mark
Salt Lake City, Utah

November 27, 2011
The Rev. Steven C. Andersen

YEAR B, Advent 01 (RCL)
Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7,17-19, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

O COME, O COME EMMANUAL

I want to begin by thanking Dean Waldon, for the honor and privilege of preaching in this magnificent cathedral church. And I want to thank the leaders and the people of St. Mark's for their always warm and genuine hospitality. As someone who spends most of my days and weeks, immersed in the business of the church, worship is a necessity for me, to ground me, to orient me, and to sustain in me in what is truly important in the world. And that is the love of God, through his Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The world of budgets and financial planning easily and often, take me far away from what truly matters.

Today brings us to a new season, and a new year in the church calendar. But I have to tell you, my Advent seasons are often discouraging and disappointing. And here is why that is. Advent is this deliberate, intentional prelude to Christmas. Christmas, the incredible, the magnificent, the glorious event of all time, of God becoming man, the divine incarnate in the birth of the infant Jesus. It is not enough that this event is beyond our comprehension. More importantly, it lies beyond our ability to fully assimilate this magnificent glory into our lives. Over the four short weeks of Advent, we are to prepare, for the coming of God. God incarnate in Jesus, God in the world, and God in us. And I am never quite ready. As Christmas Eve dawns, I usually find myself a bit

melancholy. I have been bombarded by weeks of Christmas music long before Christmas arrives. I find that my Advent season was too busy, too cluttered with meetings, appointments and obligations. And yet once again, I was too busy, too distracted, to make a decent preparation for the coming of God.

Our gospel reading this morning from Mark, speaks to the facets and cycles of our life with God. In apocalyptic terms, it describes times of great suffering, and events that shake the very heavens. It may be our good fortune, that we have not experienced such a shearing of the fabric of our lives. But others certainly have. And our turn may be yet to come. Still, it seems for Mark, that this pain and suffering are precursors; birth pains for a new creation. It is after the pain and the suffering, that we will see God's coming, with great power and glory.

Christmas, and the coming of the Christ, is what beckons to us from the other side of Advent. Perhaps the calendar is our sign, and Advent is our lesson of the fig tree, that the summer of God's presence is drawing near. Wherever we find ourselves presently, from a world painfully ravaged, to lives of lukewarm fulfillment, Advent entices us to make ready for the more, the much more, that is coming our way. Advent is our season of waiting – and watching. A time of promise, and a time for patience. It is our season of longing, and of hope. Longing for that which we need, and hoping so deeply for that which the world so desperately needs.

This morning's reading from Isaiah confesses Israel's season of Advent. But this is not really so much of a confession, as it is the lament of a people. A nation who has known God, fully present and prominent in their lives. But a people who now have walked apart from God, leaving God distant, and obscured by self-interest and sinfulness. And now, Isaiah, calls Israel to a moment of sobriety. He calls them to perceive the gulf that separates them from God. And from this place of forlorn emptiness, they can recall the awesome deeds of times past, when God gloriously moved about them, and the people walked with God in fullness of life. Isaiah longs for his people to return from their estrangement, to walk hand in hand with God once again. His forlorn cry is for the very heavens to open up, that God's presence may be undeniable, reforming and transforming, all the world.

Two things are obvious to me. The first is that I am not Isaiah. But I am also convinced, that our world today is as estranged from God as it was in the time of Isaiah. Genocide still holds in many places in the world. Millions live in soul crushing poverty, reinforced by natural disaster, corruption and evil, and widespread indifference to human suffering. Despite the gift of great abundance in our own country, the number of those in need of the basics of life continues to increase. Like Israel of old, our country cries out, for the coming of God, to a place, and in a time, that seems so very distant.

Advent is our time, to hope for, to pray for, and to live for, the coming of the divine presence. And we do so from this place and time of divine absence. The

honest and sober assessment of our distance from God, provides the clarity and the accommodation for God's presence in us. If we believe that we have all the God that we need in our lives, then we have indeed received our portion. But if we find ourselves in need of any kind, or simply unfulfilled as people of God, then now is our time to prepare some room for the coming of God. As children of God, it is our birthright, and it is God's greatest desire, to bring us close to him. God promises that this is so.

As I have said, I am never quite ready for Christmas to come. But it comes, whether I am ready or not. And at that moment, I will come to terms with my own inadequacy, and most of my failures. I will once more be overcome, awash in the joy of Emmanuel – God with us. And I will once more sing, unafraid and uninhibited by a voice, fractured and frail, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come; let earth receive her King."

But that time is not yet. Our longing is unrequited. So we wait, and we watch. And we sing the songs of Advent in our time of expectant waiting. "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appears."

In this first Sunday of the new year, I invite you to join with me, in the observance of a holy Advent. Together may we make a meaningful preparation for the coming of God. That this Christmas may find us in a truly new place for the joy that is to come. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.