

“Happy New Church Year” - Rev. Jennifer Adams

November 29, 2009 - Advent 1C

This morning we have a strange combination of messages coming at us. First of all this is New Year's Day for the Church. On the liturgical calendar, Advent I marks our beginning, the first day of the year, when we begin a new lectionary cycle that will carry us through all the seasons of the Church year – first Advent, then Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. So, this morning, as Church, we shout Happy New Year, crack open a new gospel (Luke this time through,) start a new stack of readings, change colors and proclaim with hope that Christ will come among us! Today we begin and symbolic of that beginning we light the first candle on our way towards Christmas day. There is anticipation in the air, expectation and hope lingering all around us. BUT while we celebrate this beginning and allow that anticipation to touch our souls, the gospel story is all about the end of the world. And what Luke offers is an amazing vision, a cosmic vision of that ending: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,” he tells us, “and on the earth distress among . . . People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken!” This morning we hear from Luke that when Christ comes again, life as we know it will be upset completely, changed forever, upturned, rearranged, shaken up, unsettled. From individuals shaking in their boots to stars shifting in the sky nothing will be untouched. And that's the second message we hear today. And so after that one, I wonder can we really shout out a big, “Happy New Year?” After hearing that second piece, isn't there a part of you wants to crawl back under the covers of 2009 while we still have the chance? It wasn't that bad, afterall. At least the sun and moon and stars staid in place. The powers of the world were shaken, quite a bit actually, but that's not anything new, really. And as bad as things may have gotten at times, there's at least something familiar about it all and nothing too apparently cosmic happening. Do we really want to keep counting forward, lighting more candles, hoping Christ will come again knowing that while he loves us, he will probably also unsettle us, shake us up, and stir up a new kind of new among us and out there too?

A Yes to that question is the faithful response of Advent. Yes, we want Christ to come again! We need him to come again. Yes we're waiting and watching for him among us. Yes we prepare for his coming and Yes we know it could be big, really big. Or not. But Yes we believe it will be. And our knees are trembling and our voices are cracking as we say this, but Yes, our Advent prayer is: Come Lord, Jesus come by here. Which possibly makes Advent the most courageous season of the year.

Now usually Lent gets that vote, but that's because we know how that season ends. And of course it takes a great deal of courage to continue towards the cross; I'm not arguing that but this year my vote for the “most bravery called upon” goes to Advent because this season asks us to walk forward not knowing what's ahead. And that can be the hardest moving forward of all. Sure, we know that we are moving towards a celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas . But Advent is also about the Second Coming of Christ which hasn't happened yet. Granted, there's a great deal of mystery in incarnation but at least there's a written and collective memory of when that happened and how that happened. Know matter what your background you know at least something about it. Mary and Joseph were engaged and then an angel came to Mary announcing

that she would birth the Son of God; she and Joseph got married and went to Bethlehem to be counted; when they got there, there was no room in the inn, Jesus was born in a stable, the angels hovered around and the shepherds came having heard “the good news of great joy.” Matthew says that wise men came too (from afar) and there was gold and frankincense and myrrh and Herod had a fit. Then Jesus grew up, gathered disciples, taught challenging stuff, healed a bunch of people, performed several miracles, got in trouble with the religious authorities, was crucified, died and rose again. Now there is a lot I don’t understand in all of that and it’s not without challenge and mystery and depth. But at least we know how that story goes. This other dimension of Christ’s coming among us, the Second Coming that we heard about in the gospel today is the complete unknown and not yet experienced of the how and when and what of God. Advent holds up the part of the story that is still coming to be.

And while that can make us tremble, it can also bring us peace, because at the heart of Advent is the promise that God is not done yet. And as I look around the world I hear that as extremely good news. The seemingly unending wars, the devastating poverty that encompasses a vast percentage of the population of the world, the ongoing realities of discrimination and hate, the prevalence of disease and lack of care, even right down to the personal hurts we carry and the healings we need . . . It doesn’t end with any of that. The story continues. . . which is good news and that’s why we make our prayer, “Come Lord Jesus Come.”

And when we pray that prayer our attention shifts a bit to those things that need our attention. Not just the lists that are a part of what needs to get done over the next 26 days, I have those lists too -- but this prayer draws our attentions to other kinds of things to the not yet that are a part of our faithful lives. The not yet of peace. The not yet of abundance for all people. The not yet of freedom and safety for all of God’s children. The not yet because God is not done here yet. There is more Christ to come. And so we make our prayer, Come Lord, Jesus, Come by here.

Which is why on first Advent we can shout, Happy new year and mean it. Happy new hope. Happy new possibilities and vision and promise. Happy potential. Happy attentiveness. Happy end of the world as we know it? Maybe so. Let it bring you peace as we move forward together, lighting one courageous candle after the other. Amen.