



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

# The First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2017

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

## Today's Themes in Scripture

Our new liturgical year begins today, with the shortest possible season of Advent. This Advent will have only three full weeks. The fourth week of Advent begins and ends in a single day, on Christmas Eve. This shortened Advent will require a deliberate attention to its lessons, lest they are missed among the loud, frenzied, commercial season that competes for our attention. Today's Scriptures invite us to enter a quieter season to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah spoke in a time of great personal and communal darkness. In today's First Reading, Isaiah spoke on behalf of a people recently released from exile, who were overwhelmed by all they had lost and all that needed to be done in order to rebuild their lives. Isaiah believed that God was a God of awesome deeds and power. He had redeemed his people in the past and could redeem this generation as well. He appealed to God as father, and begged him to come down and save his children, lost and wretched though they were. The people for whom Isaiah spoke were estranged from God. He described them as hard of heart, withered, sinful, unclean, and polluted. They could not save themselves but God could save them. Isaiah would wait with his people because he trusted that God would not abandon the work of his hands. He would rebuild his people. This same trust in God as savior is found in today's Psalm. The psalmist invites God to come and rouse his people to save them, confident that God will protect, sustain, and strengthen those he has created.

When St. Paul wrote to the church community in Corinth, he noted that they were also a people in waiting. They, too, were a community facing challenges but they were not waiting for God to save them. Their salvation had already been accomplished through Jesus Christ. No longer estranged from God, they had been invited into fellowship with God through Jesus. They were now a people waiting for Jesus to come again, when he would reveal his completed kingdom. While they waited, Paul reassured them of God's faithfulness to them. In Jesus, they had already been given every grace, gift, and blessing they would need to endure until Jesus returned.

Isaiah and his people waited in darkness for a salvation yet to come. The people of Corinth waited for Jesus' return with the assurance of salvation and aided by gifts bestowed through the Holy Spirit. Waiting, even under the best circumstances, has its challenges. In today's Gospel, Jesus warned that those waiting for him will not know the time of his return. Remaining vigilant is difficult. Distractions, fatigue, and inattention can cause us to become lax. Jesus advises us to be continually watchful. Advent is a time to consider: how well are we waiting for our Lord? Are we ready for his arrival?

## Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

**Reading I: Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7**

**We have not seen any God like you!**

- The first reading was written after the Israelites returned from exile and resettled in Judah.
- The people were discouraged by widespread poverty, dissension among their leaders, and the overwhelming task of rebuilding the ruins.
- The prophet challenges the Israelites to persevere at their task.

**Responsorial Psalm: 80: 2-3, 15-16, 18-19**

**Lord, Make us turn to you, show your face and we shall be saved.**

**Reading II: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

**He will strengthen you to the end.**

- Paul's letter is addressed to the Corinthians, a people who have embraced Christianity with ardor.
- They compete with one another for the most evident signs of the spirit.
- Paul reminds the people that the most essential gift for their salvation is perseverance in faith.

**Gospel: Mark 13:33-37**

**Be constantly on guard!**

- The author of Mark's Gospel wrote for a community greatly concerned with events of the end of time.
- Today's passage repeats two ideas. First, no one but God knows the time of the end. Second, the proper response of the faithful disciple is to watch and be ready at all times.
- Only those who persevere in watching will be saved.

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FIRST SUNDAY OF *Advent*

# Alert to the Signs of the Times

There's an old joke with lots of variations that says that while some kids were out playing in the parish yard, they saw Jesus coming. They ran into the church office and excitedly told the secretary. He looked out the window and then ran to the director of religious education. The staff member hurried into the administrator's office and pointed out the window. The administrator then burst into the pastor's office with the crowd trailing her and said, "Jesus is on the playground and he's headed for the office! What shall we do?" Seeing everybody in high fluster, the startled pastor dropped his agenda and turned his chair to look out the window. Suddenly he stood up, grabbed his hat and stole and car keys, and shouted, "Look busy!"

That's not far from what Jesus says in today's Gospel: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come." Jesus compared the coming of the Son of Man to a master who left his servants in charge of the home front. While the householder left all the servants with jobs to do, Jesus warned that the master could well return during their time off — dinner, late-night, pre-dawn and dawn. About the only people who worked those hours were fishermen (except, of course, the mothers who were on 24-hour call for babies and the sick).

The precise times Jesus mentioned just happened to be key moments in the passion he was about to undergo. The passion events began with an evening meal at which he told his disciples that he would give his life for them. He asked his friends to keep prayerful vigil with him during the night. At cockcrow, Peter denied knowing him. One early morning, he was condemned and on another, three days later, the women discovered that he had been raised. It was only during one of those moments that the disciples actually fell asleep, but in each of them, they either missed or denied the deeper meaning of what was happening.

The key here seems to be to pay attention to what is happening, no matter what time it is.

In our first reading, Isaiah laments the way people have gone astray, forgetting God's call and presence among them. He begs God to rend the heavens, to wake the people up to what God is trying to form them to be. Pope Francis puts that and Jesus' call into contemporary terms in *The Joy of the Gospel* when he says: "I do exhort all the communities to an 'ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times'. This is in fact a grave responsibility" (#51). He goes on to say: "This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also — and this is decisive — choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil" (Ibid).

Advent is probably the church season most vulnerable to corruption and being overshadowed by everything that coincides with it. Whereas the church starts to celebrate Christmas on the night of December 24 and continues through the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, society rolls into holiday mode after Halloween and into uncompromising materialism beginning with "Black Friday." Our cultural Christmas ends abruptly on the night of December 25 — leaving only the tree that nobody wants to take down. Ironically, there is nothing more distracting from the mood of Advent than our culture's preparations for Christmas.

Our readings remind us that, as of today, we are not simply getting into the commercial Christmas season but entering into a season of conversion. Isaiah's prayer calls on God to be the potter forming the clay of our lives. Jesus calls us to be alert to God's unexpected appearances in our lives. Pope Francis tells us it is time to discern the spirit of the age in order to increase the good in the world and thwart evil tendencies.

How do our readings orient us to enter into this shortest possible Advent season — just 22 days long? Traditionally, we talk about Advent as a time of waiting. But this week's readings emphasize watching — watching for the signs of God's presence, watching for the ways in which God desires to act as the potter of the clay of our lives. Jesus told the disciples that the master could show up at any hour — when we should be at our task or in moments of well-deserved rest. The task of discipleship then is not so much to be busy as it is to stay alert.

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