

Happy new year and welcome to Year B. Year B simply means that this is the second year in our 3 year lectionary cycle comprised of Years A, B, and C. In year A we read the Gospel of Matthew, in year B the Gospel of Mark and in year C the Gospel of Luke. There is no year devoted to the Gospel of John because we read so much of John's Gospel in the season of Easter and because the Gospel of Mark is shorter than the other Gospels we will read a chunk of John during the summer. So here we are in Advent, a Latin word that means coming or arrival and it refers to the coming of Christ ...but it's complicated because we are talking about two kinds of coming, the first time around when Jesus came as a baby and the second time around when he has told us that he will come again.

The vision presented in Mark is a heck of a way to start the new year given that this vision says things are going to get really, really bad before they get better. "Get better" is relative because Jesus shows up cloud surfing and then sends out his angels to rescue the elect, those who have been chosen. There's some final judgment implied in this and because the criteria for being elected are either very strict or kind of obscure the thought of judgment can be unsettling.

Mark hasn't been taking bad drugs; he has merely been borrowing heavily from the end times predicted by the Hebrew Scriptures: the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and David. For all the scary ending stuff, this is the ending that is like a beginning, the beginning of a different kind of time. During the season of Advent we hold both the beginning and the ending of time together in hope. We renew our hope as we prepare once again for the birth of the Christ child and we hold fast to our hope that Christ will come again and that we will be called to be with him when he does.

As Jesus says, we know neither the time nor the hour so we hang on with both hands bringing the ends together which helps us to live into the muddle of the middle, that confusion of life in the present moment, when, like most generations that have gone on before us we can see portents of doom in the natural disasters that reminds us that we are not in control, the examples of our cruelty to our fellow creatures, our indifference towards the destruction of the earth that is our home, and in the last 75 years or so, the threat of nuclear holocaust, all while continuing to celebrate marriages and births, graduations, football games, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the twinkle of Christmas lights and Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. Somehow we are to hold this tension not in fear but in confident expectation.

You may remember this golden string from the time I did the Godly Play story on the "Circle of the Church Year". This story explains how our liturgical year is arranged to be circular to keep us in touch with the different kinds of time in which we live. It begins by taking a piece of string. That piece of string has two ends because most of time is lived chronologically we start in one moment and then move onto the next; we are born and eventually we will die. In between we recognize all kinds of time: the time for getting up and going to bed, for going to work and coming home, and even our time for relaxation or play. But time is tricky because we live on the planet earth that turns soon its axis once each day and circles around the sun once each year. During this process we experience the seasons as repeating so our sense for the rhythm of life is based on the seasons of the year, a cycle that is at once both a beginning and an ending. Taking advantage of this cyclical pattern the church arranged the year as a way to

keep us in tune with the cycle of Christ's life so that our awareness that our salvation begins and ends in him is never very far from our experience of the time in our ordinary lives.

We mark our great feast days with times of preparation and different liturgical colors. Advent is the time of preparation for Christmas and it is 4 weeks long. The color for Advent is either purple or blue. The Christmas season lasts for 2 weeks and its color is white or gold or the fanciest vestments that a parish owns. Although Epiphany is an important Feast Day it is not a season and the Sundays after it are known as the Sundays after Epiphany much like the many Sundays after Pentecost are called the Sundays after Pentecost and the liturgical color is green. Easter is our greatest feast day and is marked by 6 weeks of preparation in Lent for which the color is purple. The season of Easter that lasts for 7 weeks until Pentecost and the liturgical color is white or Gold ...or the fanciest vestments that a parish owns – just like Christmas. Those vestments will also turn up on other feast days like Christ the King which was last week, and All Saints Day. If there are Eucharistic services during the week that honor a martyr the liturgical color is red but that would not happen on a Sunday since Sunday is always the day we focus on the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Advent begins the year and is a moveable feast that starts on 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday before Christmas, the Sunday nearest to the Feast of St. Andrew on November 30<sup>th</sup> because according to the Gospel of John Andrew was the first apostle Jesus called. It was Andrew who brought his brother Peter to Jesus. Therefore Andrew marks the beginning of evangelism for all of those who say that they are disciples of Christ.

I love Advent, How can anything whose symbolic color is purple be anything but good?

Admittedly Advent is a bit bi-polar, on the one hand it is a time of reflection, and penitence and on the other we are bombarded with the anticipation of Christmas Day itself in all its secular and commercial glory. So yes, it is a time of reflection and penitence but I always feel that it is less focused on sin than on feeding our potential for development. It's a fetal time, like the pregnant Mother Mary bearing Jesus in her womb. In this case we are the children in the dark womb of early winter which gives us an opportunity to go inward and reflect on our dependence on God, to relish that dependence on God, to draw nourishment from it.

Nevertheless I would have to be a Grinch if I didn't confess that I enjoy the some of the glitziness of the secular countdown to December 25. It's giddy, and intoxicating, full of schmaltz and it comes out of our need for joy and the renewal of hope brought about by the birth of Christ. I could however wish that it didn't start before Halloween.

But like those who want to go from Palm Sunday to Easter bypassing Good Friday, who miss the deep mystery of the crucifixion and death before the resurrection, we can get off track by focusing on the celebration to come when we don't take advantage of the Advent season to spend a little time in the mystery of God.

So if you want to balance the saccharine Disneyfication of Christmas and get your Advent on, take a moment to listen to the haunting hymns that speak of our longing for salvation, for redemption in the face of the hardships of life, and our own sinfulness. Let your imagination follow the eschatological yearnings of the readings, enter into the phantasmagorical visions of the end and ponder what that might mean. Use an Advent calendar

to mark off the days or just take some time sit quietly in the darkness and think about the miracle of the light to come. Whatever you choose to do don't let the time pass you by for as Jesus said "...Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

Amen