



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Advent 1 (A)

[RCL] Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

### The Good News of our Judge

The time has come: Advent, a season of preparation. We prepare for a joyous celebration of the good news that our God took on human flesh, became one of us, was born for us, a child.

But before we get to the manger, at the beginning of Advent every year, our lessons and collect proclaim that Christ will come again to be our judge. We don't know when. Maybe right in the middle of our gift-buying and cookie-baking and tree-decorating, Christ will return in glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead.

Is this really good news?

Every Advent starts, not with a baby shower for a pregnant Mary, not with Joseph the carpenter assembling a crib, but with Jesus telling us business as usual is coming to an end.

The theological word for this kind of talk is apocalyptic, and frankly, this apocalyptic Jesus is a little embarrassing, at least to many of us Episcopalians. We like the gentle Jesus, the comforting one, who taught by telling stories and never gave exams. We like the one whose teaching we can turn into helpful advice for how to make our day just a little bit better, the Jesus whose wisdom sounds plausible to us, the Jesus we agree with, or, let's just say it, the Jesus who would agree with us. Sometimes, when we're in the mood for it, we even like the angry Jesus flipping over tables in the temple. "You go, Jesus! You give them what for!"

But this apocalyptic Jesus, who talks of judgment and the end of life as we know it . . . ? We're not so sure.

For one thing, his timing seems way off. "Therefore you also must be ready," he says, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." He sounds so certain. And, well, the longer we wait, the less we may be expecting his return.

One way Christians have tended to resolve the awkwardness of what seems like a delay is to come to Jesus' defense and say: what he really means is that Christ comes among us in unexpected ways, at unexpected times, now. Get ready, because you never know when Jesus will show up, as Mother Teresa called it, "in

his most distressing disguise.” She knew when she and the sisters of her community served lepers, the poor, the outcast, they were really serving Christ. And we can too. This is true. We can recognize and serve the Christ who comes to meet us in the person in need. Jesus himself said so.

Jesus also said he would come to us in other ways too, ways we might miss if we are looking only for big, showy, obvious ways. Jesus Christ comes here to meet us today in bread and wine: the body of Christ for the Body of Christ. So, yes, Jesus Christ comes among us every day. Again and again, Christ comes again. True. Every day brings opportunities for us to keep alert, to be on the watch for ways to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves,” as we promise to do in our baptismal covenant.

But the Jesus we meet in scripture also seems pretty sure that there’s another coming, another Advent on the way, someday, when Christ will come again. And then, his coming will be unmistakable. Not in some “distressing disguise” as a person in need or in ordinary substances like bread and wine. No, then, Christ will come in glorious majesty to be our judge. And all our business as usual, all the things we take for granted as the ways the world works—the way things are, life as we know it—will cease, and we will stand before our Judge.

And yes, for countless people down through the millennia, the end of life as they knew it has come through death—when the clock stopped for them, as it very well may do for us before that final Advent. With no more chances to make things right, to give, to share, to forgive, to apologize. To let go of our grudges, half-truths, or un-truths. No more chances to walk in the Lord’s ways, to give up our swords and our spears, or whatever we use as a sword or a spear, whatever we use to gain the advantage, to hurt, to keep others at a distance, to engage in wars, real or metaphorical, to wound or warp or wrangle. No more chances to give up words, wealth, whatever -isms work to our advantage (and are weapons just as surely as any sword or spear). No more chances. Time’s up. Maybe when we least expect it. Maybe when we are completely unprepared.

There we will be: before our Judge.

Here is the good news of Advent: our Judge is also our Redeemer. Our Judge is the very God become incarnate, taking on human flesh, born as a vulnerable baby, who lived and died as one of us, to reconcile us to God, the maker and redeemer of all. Our Judge is the very one who came to set us free from the bondage of any sin, anything that separates us from one another, from being the beloved child of God we were made to be. Our Judge is the very one who, because of the forgiveness given to us, frees us from the pretensions and petty efforts we make to puff ourselves up, to defraud others and ourselves, to offer the paltry defense of saying, “I’m basically a good person.” No, St. Paul reminds us. In Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

Keeping God’s love and grace and mercy before us can give us the courage to look at ourselves and see all that Jesus has done for us, all the forgiveness we’ve needed and received. The grace of hindsight, of seeing Christ on the cross, of looking at the wounds of Christ, borne for us, allows us the chance to be honest and say that we need the grace and mercy of God. And, thanks be to God, God gives us those very things.

Our Judge is also our Redeemer. And what feels like a delay in his coming, or an embarrassment, or an impossibility, is actually grace. There is still time to embrace, to experience the embrace of the one whose judgment is always a call to love, to share love, know love, live love.

We can take refuge in this truth from Paul's letter to the Romans: "Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Advent of Christ as a baby is a reason for hope. The Advent of Christ as our Judge is good news when we cling to the hope we proclaim, as in these words from one of our eucharistic prayers: "For in these last days you sent [Jesus] to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. In him, you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life."

Come, Lord Jesus.

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