

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 1<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT - A-  
Isaiah 2: 1-5 Psalm 122 Romans 13: 11-14 Matthew 24: 37-44

Dear Preachers:

Most years I think Advent should begin with an apology. Just when the streets glow with Christmas lights, front yards have crib scenes, store windows display cozy Victorian Christmas scenes, families plan trips to see the folks...just when many of us resolve to take a yearly break and try to put aside the annoyances from our busy lives, try to patch up family squabbles, feel nostalgic for the past and anticipate the potential good cheer of the coming holiday...just about then, Advent kicks down the door and comes bursting in with images of earthquakes, famines, plagues, signs in the stars, sun and moon and people fainting in terror. (The exact manifestations depend on which cycle of scriptures we are hearing.) That's the usual Advent.

Of course, this year it is all different. Each day I turn on radio or tv news wondering, “What next?” It seems we have watched these familiar Advent readings take awful reality on live tv —collapse of the sturdiest buildings, famine in the bellies of drought weakened refugees fleeing war and fiery scenes caused by 1,000 pound incendiary bombs. So, don't we deserve a break? Haven't we had enough recent destruction, do we need our barely healed wounds opened by scriptural poking and prodding? Enough already!

Fred Craddock once wrote that Advent comes and gives us an occasion to utter a communal groan. A groan for what is not yet in the world and a groan with all creation that also suffers and is subject to decay. We experience that decay already; so much falls apart, is broken and needs mending. We utter a groan this Advent in particular for we are tragically reminded that there is more than enough hatred in the world to destroy unsuspecting people who have just arrived at work in their office buildings and are probably sipping coffee while chatting with coworkers about the pennant race. We groan because our attempts at justice have also cost innocent life and made thousands into winter refugees. The Holy Spirit not only hears our groans this Advent, but, as Paul reminds us (Romans 8), joins us in the groan and alerts us to the pain of our suffering sisters and brothers and of the damaged earth itself.

No, we don't need Advent's aggravation if it is just a reminder of bad news, with more to come. We have already been caught by surprise, we don't need the Noah-flood that caught people unawares and "carried them all away." But we do need this coming-again-God to finish what is so undone in the world. The world is tired and in shambles and we Christians don't seem to have the where-with-all to reinvigorate it or help it very much. We yearn for the much promised peaceable dominion, but what we have instead is one broken in pieces of pain and darkness. Where will we meet this returning Christ? Should we flee this tired place and start all over again in another part of the world? No, not really because the full return of the Son happens, if the scriptures are any indication, while people are engaged in ordinary daily living—eating, drinking, marrying, farming, grinding grain and sleeping in one's own home. We are to stay in place, but be in that place in a different way. Life may seem ordinary, we are told, but things are not as they seem. Right behind all the uneventful is the Holy One ready for an entrance--- "Therefore, stay awake!".

For this return we are Advent-eager, longing for the Son's full entrance to set things the way God wanted them in the first place before sin tainted and tarnished what the Creator called "Good." Let's not sleep, let's not be deceived, Christ is coming. But Advent is not a do-nothing season waiting for some distant intervention. Rather it is a waking up time. We still have important work to do for Christ until he comes. Let's make the most of our time, and be encouraged by his promised return. How totally discouraged we would be if we did not have the hope of his return! Then what we see that gives us cause to groan would be the final outcome of our world. Our groan would never end, our healing never be complete. "Prove that he is really returning!" ---you say. I can't, I respond, for we are hoping against hope. This hope causes us to trust that even now Christ is near working with his alert disciples to bring to fulfillment the reign of God whose beginning he proclaimed in our midst.

Not knowing— it is one motif in today's gospel. The people in Noah's time, "did not know" and so the flood caught them by surprise. Jesus advises the disciple to say awake, "for you do not know on which day the Lord will come." The master in the parable does not know "the hour the thief is coming." No, we do not know when the Son of Humanity is going to return. 2000 years have passed without his spectacular reentry.

Matthew wrote this gospel for an early church whose sense of anticipation for Christ's return was dulled. They had been waiting a long time and still no sign in the heavens that he was on his way. Matthew seems to be addressing this delay and encouraging his readers to look closer to see Christ's frequent entrance into our lives. The parable about the thief shows this shift in emphasis. It seems meant to wake us up to Christ's return into our daily lives in unexpected and undetected ways. He will come like a thief who even knows his way past our newly installed electronic burglar alarms. He will slip in and will be there. There will be no private guarded spot of our lives to which he will not have access. He is coming to the hidden spots, maybe too to the hidden jewelry, stocks, electronic equipment and all the stuff of our lives. He'll break in and show us how vulnerable we are and how dependent we have become on having that stuff. Christ comes like a thief—hardly the good shepherd image to which we are accustomed and soothed. Rather, this is quite a different metaphor for how to image him. Praise God that Christ is clever enough to get to us, to get into our locked houses and locked hearts, to slip in when we are not expecting him and our guard is down. Maybe Advent is the right time to deactivate the burglar alarm.

Truth be told, we need him to come, even past our well guarded defenses. We need him to break in somehow, get by our delusions and illusions, our excuses and procrastination. We will put up a fight of course, get extra busy and even make promises for future changes. But the thief will hear none of it. He is here now and wants a response right away. If we are really alert this Advent we will figure out some way to give in to him. There is lots of talk at this time of the year about buying gifts—spending to boost the economy. Why, a shopping spree might even be considered an act of patriotism! We have lots of reminders to go on those sprees too. I was walking through a Macy's store in late October and there were gilded Christmas trees everywhere and it wasn't even Halloween yet! We are supposed to buy gifts, more gifts.

We will have our gift list, but the season isn't about our buying gifts for others. It is about a gift though, the gift God is giving us. Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez ("Journal for Preachers", Advent, 1996) reminds us that we are on the receiving end of God's gift giving. To receive God's gift is to be reminded that all of us, adults as well as children, are dependent, unable to provide for what we really need—our salvation. We can not let the gift giving we do this Christmas overshadow our awareness of the gift that is being given us by Christ's daily and

frequent entrance into our lives. “So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Humanity will come.” What Clyde Crews says about a second nativity is also applicable to us in early Advent when the focus is on Christ’s second coming.

“The way to the second birth for each of us is the way to our own inner nativity. There is a fare to be paid to reach such a state. It involves discipline and prayer, listening and service. It means that we are summoned to be patron saints of the possible:

- to make a difference, not in some imaginary tomorrow of perfection, but in the confusion of the now;
- to live out of our brokenness and to work toward healing;
- to make of our lives an invitation for to others to live more fully and more freely;
- to see and encourage in others what they often do not recognize as strengths in themselves
- to have a care for the mysteries, the troubles, even the darkness in others, knowing that in some cases they may have traveled distances that we have not had to go.”

(SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT: EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992, page 16)

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Last week I recommended:

Diane Bergant with Richard Fragomeni, PREACHING THE NEW LECTIONARY, YEAR C. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000.

Carl Diederichs writes to remind me that there is also a commentary by the same authors on Year A and Year B. With Carl, I would recommend all three in the series. Thanks Carl.

#### QUOTABLE:

WREATH

Advent, 1996

Tonight we will circle  
the tall trunks of these candles

with a wheel of pine and cedar,  
twine spring of Veni, Veni  
into this compass with many needles  
pointing us to what's been lost,  
scattered to the periphery  
of its open-coned center.

In weeks to come  
we will light with the awestruck matches  
of our tongues a Word waxing unseen  
to the waning of these tapers;  
a branch pushing through  
the undergrowth of our waiting  
that fires withing us  
this burning toward the green.

-----Daniel Mills, quoted in SOJOURNERS MAGAZINE, Nov.-  
Dec, 1997

JUSTICE NOTES:  
“Therefore, stay awake!”

A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT OF A SUFFERING PEOPLE

(With our attention focused on another part of the world these days, here is a reminder that travail continues in a country that not too long ago was of concern to us here in the States..... Lest we forget... El Salvador).

- The growth of the Salvadoran economy has been less than 3% in the past 5 years. This year the economy is growing at 2%.
- The inequity in the distribution of the income generated by this growth is one of the highest in the world. The richest 20% of the population receive 18 times more income than the poorest 20%. In the developed countries the highest income earners earn about 5 times what the poor earn.
- Over 51% of all Salvadorans fall below the poverty line. Nearly half of these poor do not earn enough to feed themselves.
- Twenty six percent of all Salvadorans over 15 are illiterate.
- Over the years, due to the civil war and poor conditions, over 1.5 million Salvadorans have emigrated. About ten thousand Salvadoran emigrate annually in search of a better life.

- As of December 2000 there was a housing deficit of 500,000 housing units. The earthquake added another 164 thousand units to this number. The United Nations Human Development Report indicates that it will take nearly 90 years to eliminate the housing deficit.
  - Discrimination against women is still very much a reality. Few women have influential political positions. Women are paid nearly 30% less than men and have much more difficulty in getting work than men.
  - The eastern part of the country just recently experience a drought that has affected 200,000 people. Crop loss ranged from 65% to 90% depending on the crop. Crop loss is valued at \$26 million.
- From the newsletter, "Project Salvador Update."

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)
5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

#### DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh.

Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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