

PREACHING ADVENT YEAR A 2001

Boarding the New York, Kennedy bound plane out of San Francisco a day after the plane crash in Queens was a sobering experience. I noticed the somber expressions of the American Airlines personnel--- starting at the ticket counter, through the inspection points, at the gate and on board. I wondered if any of them lost friends or knew their coworkers among the lost plane's crew. There were no families with children or tourists waiting to board the flight. Almost all the passengers were business people. Normally they would be conversing and joking with their associates or talking on cell phones-- but not this day. I could not detect a smile on any face. The tv monitors were showing pictures of the still smoldering wreckage from the previous day's plane disaster. The crash had reached us across the country not only affecting our routine but wrenching our hearts, filling us with shared pain for those already bearing heavy burdens of loss and grief on the other side of the country. But then, there has been less and less a sense of the former routine or the previous boredom of flying that preceded September 11th.

A New York teenage girl tells her father that since the attack on the Trade Center her generation has to be adult in their awareness of the world around them. They can not be allowed the casualness of their former youthful ways, "We have to be adults." During the two months since the attack, she feels the loss of the in-between time she and her friends had, they can no longer be just be teenagers. (THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE, November 11.) Life feels diminished for a lot of us, hope is the elusive virtue. Douglas John Hall (JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS, ADVENT) says that most of us do not feel the full-blown version of despair that so many in destitute parts of the world feel constantly. But he does think that, even prior to the most recent traumas, many of us in the first world experience a more covert form of hopelessness. People who feel quite o.k., he says, may be masking a more subtle form of despair.

After my transcontinental flight, I arrive in New York where local and national news remind me that even our civil leaders are trying to help us fight despair and a downward spiral of "life as we know it." Newspapers on the stands at the airport inform me that the mayor of the city, the governor of the state, and even the president, are suggesting ways to boost our personal and national spirits. We are told to continue to live our lives; go to work; fly airplanes; enter tall buildings and national monuments; go to Disneyland and most of all--- go to the malls and buy. We are encouraged to do our patriotic duty, buy a lot for Christmas so as to help get us back on our feet and back to "normal." Well, getting us back to normal just isn't in our power---whatever normal is or was.

People are yearning for a sense of normalcy. The Advent preacher can touch into that yearning, not by suggesting a nostalgic return to the way it was before September 11th. But the preacher can help us acknowledge our deep fears and heightened sense of anxiety. More than ever, we are aware how much we have in common with those to whom these Advent scriptures were originally addressed. They too had experienced a collapse of their world, a loss of control over their daily lives.

The scriptures these Advent Sundays, particularly the first readings, all from Isaiah, will offer us powerful images to touch our imagination with hope and give us a vision of what will come to pass when our God comes. Isaiah's prophetic poetry fills the hearts of a modern people with hope, just as it did for those Israelites in slavery and exile from their homeland. Isaiah says to them and us, that where there has been war, God comes to bring peace... "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." (First Sunday) One is coming who will restore the lineage of David, give the people a faithful shepherd to lead them. "On that day, "a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom." (Second Sunday) God has seen the ways the Israelites are enslaved by forces more powerful than they and so God is going to deliver them, and us too in our own sense of powerlessness, and bring them home across a desert that will bloom. They will enter Zion "singing, crowned with everlasting joy." (Third Sunday) Delivery from despair will come in the form of a newborn child who shall be Emmanuel, God with us. God is coming to journey our road with us and to strengthen us when we falter and grow weary. (Fourth Sunday) For the unprepared, the bloated, the indifferent and the evil doers, the news is not good and catches them completely off guard. But for the long suffering and the hope-filled, the news seems too good to be true. God has noticed them after all and is coming to save them. There will be rest for the weary and safety for the vulnerable in the hands of God.

These scriptural images, and so many others from the Advent readings, will help us stay engaged in our daily struggles to bring their promise to completion; they will steer our course and enter our daily prayer. We will be ready to welcome the God who comes to deliver us. God will come, because God has come before, and our confidence in the faithfulness of God fills us with the hope for new possibilities. We trust the promises of Advent because we can trust the promises of God. "Advent" is not a biblical term. God's "coming close" has two aspects to it--- judgment and salvation. In God, these two dichotomies are united. Advent remembers God's deeds in the past and trusts that God will not remain passive in

the present or in the future.

Lectionary themes

The pattern for the readings for Years, A, B, C, is as follows:

- the first readings,(except Advent B)---- speak of a coming age
- the second readings----have eschatological themes which either portray a future age or encourage Christians to prepare
- Gospel readings--- 1st. Sunday---- “little apocalypses” from the Synoptics
- 2nd. & 3rd. Sundays---- John the Baptist, or the Magi, forerunners of a new age
- 4th. Sunday---- scenes from the Annunciation

A Real gift this season:

There is a lot of talk this year in particular about buying gifts, spending lots to boost our economy. Strange, because at former times, World War II for example, we were told to live frugally and preserve our resources for our forces fighting overseas. But now, to be patriotic, we are told to go on a shopping spree. And the buying season has begun early. I was walking through Macy’s a week before Halloween, and they had already put up golden hued trees and Christmas decorations! It was still early Autumn, and I could feel the pressure saying--- “better make out your gift list.” But the reason for the season is not our gift giving. It is about God’s gift to us. Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez (JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS, Advent, 1996) notes that 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 spending and the gift giving we do this Christmas overshadow our receiving the gift God has prepared for us. The Incarnation celebrates the permanent union God has made with us. The gift is that God will bring us back to “normal.” Not the way we used to be before our lives got so shaken by terror on our shores, but the “normal” God had in mind for us when God created us in God’s image and then redeemed us in Christ.