

28 November, 2010; 1 Advent A
Is 2:1-5; Ps 122
Rom 13:11-14; Matt 24: 36-44

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Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the time when our tamed images of Jesus crash straight into the fierce, abiding, and unpredictable reality of God. Reaching towards the Babe in the manger, we instead find ourselves confronted with the Eternal Judge, the Creator of All Things, God enthroned in Heavenly Splendor with the nations falling in holy terror before his face. It is the season when the Lamb roars in like a lion, when we are reminded starkly that we must take God on God's terms, not on our own. Before Christ's word of love came John's word of warning: Repent! In this Advent season, we are invited to emerge from our places of comfort and stand in the bracing wind which comes howling out of the wilderness of God.

There are few better places to begin to examine our souls than the place where Isaiah leads us, Temple Mount, in the city of Jerusalem. It is a babble of tourists and pilgrims, pointing, praying, taking pictures, weeping, wondering, looking for lunch. Around the edges, Christians pray at the remains of the Beautiful Gate, standing in the one place we can be certain that Jesus once stood. On the high point gleams the golden dome of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, eight walls clothed in intricate blue tile, and a cavernous space within where thousands bow their faces to the prayer rug. If you wrap yourself in modest attire, you can follow a guide who will show you a rock with a hollow in it -- the rock, he will tell you, from which Mohammed ascended into heaven. The same one, he will tell you, where Abraham led Isaac to be sacrificed. A Jewish interpreter would tell you that that same stone was the location of the Holy of Holies, the inmost room in the Temple where the Spirit of God dwelled, which only the High Priest could enter, once a year on Yom Kippur, with a rope tied around his ankle so that, if God struck him dead, they could drag his body out. Going back further, rabbinic tradition teaches that from that rock, God created the world, and from its substance gathered the earth from which Adam was made. They call it the navel of the world, the place where an umbilical cord once connected us to God.

Everybody wants to own it. The quarrels are frequent and fierce. Muslims will not let Jews pray in it, so the Jews flock to the Wailing Wall instead. Some Jews want the mosque to be torn down, so that Judaism's holiest site can be restored to Jewish hands. Certain sects of Christians want the Jewish Temple to be restored, too, as they believe that to be a necessary precursor of the Second Coming. Palestinian newspapers stoke the belief that ongoing archaeological work on the site is really an Israeli attempt to undermine the foundations of the mosque so that it will collapse. "In days to come," writes Isaiah, "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it...Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war

anymore.” (Is 2:2) It is as if we have heard half the message -- enough to covet the mountain of the Lord’s house, but not enough to embrace God’s peace.

That kind of half-baked formation constitutes one of the greatest dangers to our souls’ health. It is easy -- so easy! -- to embrace part of the truth of Christ, and then to think we have made it, we have arrived, we are there, and to let down our guard. The out-and-out sinner at least makes no pretense to virtue. We, however, can claim holiness while breeding monsters. “Keep awake!” urges Christ. “Wake from sleep,” writes Paul. They are not speaking to pagan unbelievers, but to members of the Christian community, those who have been lulled into complacency. But the truth is that our conversion marks the start of our struggle, not its end. Evil does not need to trouble the torpid. The devil saves his barbs for those who are beginning to do good. St. Peter reminds us, “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith.” (I Peter 5:8-9) “Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light,” writes Paul, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Rom 13:12,14)

But where is the armor of light, and how do we put on Christ? The answer lies in our reading from Isaiah: we learn it. The great preacher Fleming Rutledge notes the ways in which we are shaped by the messages we are taught. “In the [Macedonian] refugee camps, there are gatherings in the evenings where adults respond enthusiastically as children recite poems they have memorized about Serbian atrocities. Thus one generation after another teaches the children whom to despise.”¹ Nor is this lesson left to chance. Barry Bearak reported in *The New York Times* a conversation he overheard in one such camp: “‘Are Serbs good people?’ the father asks his five-year-old son. The boy was confused. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Who stole our money, took our house and burned our car?’ the father asked impatiently. This time, the boy was in tune. ‘The filthy Serbs,’ he said. ‘And what should you do if you meet a Serb?’ ‘I will kill him,’ the little boy said.”² In that simple exchange, the child had been taught war. He had been taught to want to kill.

The challenge for us as Christians is to devote as much energy and discipline to learning God as other people expend on teaching and learning sin. We have to die daily to self in order to rise daily into Christ. This process of dying and rising is in our very blood and bone. When James Watson delved into the structure of human DNA, he found a double helix -- at our core, we human beings circle around the center, rising or falling with each turn. Remaining where we are is not an option, so we might as well try to ascend and grow.

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Help my Unbelief*, 37.

² *Ibid*, 162.

The Wall Street Journal ran an extended piece on the formation which Marine recruits undergo at Parris Island. Over the course of eleven weeks, these recruits, many of whom come from disadvantaged or abusive backgrounds, undergo an intensive training practice which teaches them “self-discipline” and leaves them (in the article’s words) “drug free, physically fit, and courteous to their elders. They have overcome deep differences of class and race and learned to live and work as a team”³ They have become so different from what they were that they often find it difficult to interact with their families and old friends. One of them commented, “There isn’t a lot of teaching in society about the importance of courage, honor, and commitment. It’s difficult to go back into a society of ‘what’s in it for me?’”⁴

“Courage, honor, and commitment”: The Marines have effectively tapped into the idealism of their recruits, teaching them to claim a standard of selfless conduct and strive for it. The techniques they use are not unfamiliar. Hauerwas and Willimon sum up the process: “They put them in a group, they move[] them through a perilous ordeal, they [teach] them a new language, they [give] them skills to analyze what was wrong with their former lives.”⁵ We do much the same thing here at Christ Church -- but without the obstacle courses! When a newcomer decides that he or she wishes to become Episcopalian, we put them into a class, help them to analyze their lives in the light of the Gospel, teach them the language of faith, help them to make a rule of life to guide the next stage of their growth in faithfulness, and make them undergo baptism or confirmation. What is different about Marine Corps formation and ours are two key things: first, the degree of mutual accountability which follows initiation, and, second, the fact that Marines have a legitimate outlet for their aggression, whereas Christians strive to follow the Prince of Peace. We are not trying to learn war, but to learn peace. We are trying to learn to keep our eyes on Christ.

All this would be easier if our hearts would change more quickly. As it is, we are necessarily unfinished, struggling to run swiftly toward Christ while our feet remain mired in the mud. It is easy -- all too easy -- to deal with our frustrations by projecting them onto our neighbors. *Well, at least I’m not like that, we say. Or, those other Christians don’t understand Christ at all.* And then there is that problem of aggression. It is easier, far easier, to demonize our neighbor than it is to exorcise our own demons. But it is that very neighbor -- the one who is as fallible as we are -- whom God commands us to love.

“Are your neighbors good people?” the Father asks. “Yes,” the Son replies. “Who stole your money, took your house, corrupted your religion, and oppressed your poor?” he asks again. “Our filthy neighbor,” the Son replies. “And what should do you if you

³ Thomas E. Ricks, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 1995, cited by Hauerwas and Willimon in *Where Resident Aliens Live*, 74.

⁴ *Ibid*, 76.

⁵ *Where Resident Aliens Live*, p.76.

meet a neighbor?" "I will die for him," the Son replies. "Out on a lonely hill, beyond the town walls, surrounded by those who think I am a fool, I will die for him."

And so must we.

We do not know the form of our death, whether in the daily offering of our gentleness to one who is crotchety and in pain, the sudden gift of forgiveness to a person who has hurt us badly, the proffering of hope against all odds, or the sudden gun in the alley. We do not know what we will be asked to give, or when, or even where Christ will appear to demand it. We can only keep alert, train, strive ever onward, reach toward our God even when we cannot see God's face. We can only cling to our humility, for, by the grace of God, it is our very frailty and sin which become the bridge between ourselves and those around us. When we remember our own weakness, we can forgive that of others. When we meditate on our own failings, we can refrain from judgment. When we admit that we, too, need the forgiveness of Christ, we can set others free.

In the time of the desert fathers, a holy old monk went to visit another old hermit. He came to the man's cave and was invited in. "How is it with your soul?" he asked. But the host-monk, who was a proud man, replied, "I thank God that all is well with me." "I envy you," replied the holy man. "As for me, sometimes I am troubled by lust in the night." "Oh, well, that sometimes happens to me, too," said his host. "And sometimes I struggle with anger," said the holy man. "Yes, I do that too," said his host. And sin by sin, the holy man claimed all the frailty of his human nature, and, with each one, he won an honest admission from the proud monk. Finally, they knelt and prayed together, weeping, for the grace of God. So it is that we win over our neighbors and, in doing so, save ourselves, for "whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul and will cover a multitude of sins." (James 5:20)

The thing about sin is that it spreads like rot, not only within us, but between us. Those of you who have been listening closely will notice that I have done a bit of a bait-and-switch today; St. Paul warned his converts against drunken carousing, and I have been speaking of hatred and ethnic cleansing. But the two are not unrelated. The fault-line in our own heart, whatever it may be for each of us, is the one which evil will use. When I throw out my leftovers unused, which happens at least once a week, I am reminded that I have appropriated to myself more than I need, and that others will go hungry for lack of the food I've wasted. Even worse, I am accustoming myself to taking more than I need: of food, of water, of power, of other people, of human lives. By my daily practice of excess, I am teaching myself to become coarse to the needs of others.

And those around me can see that. When we claim the name of Christ, but conduct ourselves in ways which render that name unintelligible, we drag the life and death of Christ through the mud and compromise the witness of the church. It is hard to call people to be different, when we are not. It is hard to call the world to peace when we embrace war, to call the world to forgiveness when we are relentless in persecuting our own enemies, to call the world to compromise when we insist on ending up on top.

It is hard to demonstrate the beauty of even the holiest place or thing if we seek to own it, rather than to share it.

But if sin spreads from person to person, so does grace. And if God's final appearance is unpredictable, God's daily arrival is not. Wherever two or three strive together to welcome Christ, Christ appears. Wherever a man or woman prays for mercy, Christ appears. Wherever a sinner turns from evil and embraces what is good, for the seventh or the seventy-seventh time, Christ appears. So let us embrace anew the high challenge of our faith. Let us die daily to self, and rise again to Christ and to one another. Let us live lives of such compelling beauty that when others see us, they will want to be what we are, and so will embrace the love of Christ. And when Christ comes at last in power, at whatever hour or day, I believe we shall see that he was with us, all along.

Amen.