

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday November 29, 2009

Advent 1 C 2009

In the name of our one, ever creating, ever loving, ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the start of the new Church Year. Advent is about new beginnings, about the coming of God's Promised One. But you can't have new beginnings without endings. And so, while the world outside is busy and distracted, we sit here, in church, contemplating our "in between times". Come to think of it, we spend a lot of our lives in various "in between times". So it seems appropriate as we start the new year in our faith journeys to contemplate endings and then new beginnings. We can't enjoy beginnings and endings if we don't like change. I think that's why the world is more than happy to provide us with countless distractions – especially during this Christmas season.

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is from the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in turbulent times when the Kingdom of Judah was observing all the religious rituals and formalities, but was heedless of the ethics that underlay them. It gave a nod to God but relied on its own economic and political power for security rather than on the ethics of God's law – to do justice and to love kindness. Jeremiah preached that God was going to use the Babylonians to punish the Kingdom and was arrested for seditious preaching.

Now Jeremiah's prophecy has come true and Jeremiah is enslaved in Babylon along with his people. But now a different message has been given to Jeremiah. Rather than looking backward, like other Prophets had, Jeremiah receives a new word from God – to look forward. He anticipates a new public life where there will be safety and personal and family

well-being will be restored and God will send a new King out of the Davidic line whose kingdom will endure forever.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God offers God's people hope – even in the most difficult of in between times. That is one of the great lessons of Advent. During this season, we are invited to examine all of the anxieties and uncertainties we have in our own in between moments in our lives. But we are instructed to do this with hope – with the assurance that God is with us – which is the meaning of Emmanuel – a name given to the Christ Child.

In our Gospel lesson, we also anticipate endings as we start our church year and anticipate the birth of the Christ Child. Apocalyptic imagery is often used to anticipate the arrival of God's power into our world and lives. Jesus points to the darkening of the Sun and the falling of the stars. While many view this as indicating the end of the world, it could also refer to the fall of the Roman Empire, whose symbol was the Sun, and its vassal kings who were symbolized as stars around the sun. Jesus was referring to momentous changes in public life that would affect everyday life. He switches from the cosmic to the mundane – the fig tree and how it's changes tell the time.

This is another great Advent theme – being alert. We are not called to great changes, but we are called to keep alert and to live the usual unusually well. We can learn to hear God speaking to us in the most ordinary events of our everyday lives – just like observing the fig trees.

During Advent we anticipate changes, we anticipate God fulfilling God's promises of peace and justice. We anticipate hearing yet again the Gospel story – that God loves us, forgives us and offers us new lives filled with grace. We are told to anticipate the changes of our in between times with confidence.

This is the message little Presley will hear again and again in her faith journey. In Baptism she will be join us in the Body of Christ in this world. As we do the liturgy of baptism, I urge you to listen attentively to the words of the Baptismal Covenant. The three renunciations

are calls to repentance. This isn't about beating up on ourselves for our misdeeds, but a change of heart as we turn from our distractions and the lords of this world and "turn to God", that is to embrace the ethics God has set for us and to go beyond the mind the world gives us and to enter a new way of thinking and seeing. The three affirmations that follow outline the ethics that will bring about new lives and a new world – living into Christ and bringing his grace and love into the world.

Presley's parents are giving her a great gift by bringing her to the baptismal font. They gave her life and now they give her eternal life in the Risen Christ. They give her a community where she can grow in the knowledge of Jesus and what Jesus taught and did. They have given her a new name, the same name we all received at baptism – Christian.

The Baptism of little Presley this morning is a reminder that what we hope for is here in the world – we have to just be alert to it in order to see it. The baptism of this child can be a reminder to us that we, too, are always called to new life. Pay attention to the words as we join her in renewing our own baptismal covenants. The first part is the Apostles' Creed – the oldest statement of Christian belief – done in question form. But that is the head stuff that we work to get into our hearts. It's what the kids call "the talk". The second part consists of the promises we make that flow from our faith. That's what the kids call "the walk". I always tell parents that if they can teach their children to live by those promises they will have done their jobs.

So let's go make a new Christian!

Amen.