

Advent 1, Year A, 2010  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's started. The all-consuming rush towards Christmas. This morning in the New York Times there were four short articles on new Christmas traditions. My email inbox is full of ads urging me to get my shopping done and tempting me with discounts. And the stores, which began with Christmas decorations after Halloween have moved into full Christmas mode with never ending loops of Christmas carols.

But here in church you won't hear Christmas carols for another four weeks. Because the tradition for the last 1500 years or so has been to spend these last four weeks before Christmas as a time of preparation, a time to get ourselves ready for Christ's coming, his coming as a baby in Bethlehem, and his coming a second time when all the world will face his judgement and creation will be renewed. And because the birth of Christ just over 2000 years ago was so momentous that it reset our calendar - we measure years in relation to his birth - because it reset the secular calendar, we in the church also reset our calendars in anticipation of his coming. Christ's coming is the beginning of something new, and so the church begins its year not on January 1, but four Sundays before Christmas, the first Sunday of Advent, which is today. We start a new cycle of readings,

moving from the gospel according to St Luke to the gospel according to St Matthew;  
 we shift from the pastoral epistles  
 to the letters to the Romans and the Corinthians;  
 and when we get to ordinary time, from Trinity Sunday through the end of the year,  
 we'll abandon the prophets  
 to go back to the great stories of the patriarchs,  
 of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses.  
 And as the new year begins, looking towards the coming of Christ, we change out the vestments  
 and altar hangings to purple,  
 marking this season of preparation.

Because that's where the Church's Advent and our society's preoccupation with Christmas  
 coincide.

both of them are times of preparation.  
 Whether it's preparing for the pile of gifts under the tree  
 or preparing for the gift of Jesus Christ,  
 we spend this time  
 getting ready.

And that's the focus of all three of our readings today,  
 whether it's the cry to walk in the light of the Lord in Isaiah,  
 the warning to pay attention lest you not be ready for the coming of the Son of Man in the  
 gospel,  
 or the wake up call of Romans.

And it's that last reading  
 that I'd like to focus on today, the reading from the epistle to the Romans.

Paul is writing this letter  
 to the members of  
 the church in Rome.  
 It's the height of the Roman Empire,  
 and they live at the very center of it all.  
 The largest, most powerful city.  
 Add the legislative weight of Washington  
 to the financial and cultural power of New York,  
 together with an Empire that stretches across the known world,  
 and you have something like Rome  
 in the first century.  
 Rome is busy, and life for those living there  
 as hectic and crazy as life is for us.  
 Which makes it kind of ironic  
 that Paul says to them,  
 "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep."

Because of course, life is too busy  
 for them to sleep. It's a long time  
 since they've had the luxury  
 of sleeping in;  
 even if they didn't have kids clamoring for attention  
 and work constantly needing doing  
 the clatter and bustle of a busy city  
 meant that sleeping beyond daybreak  
 was pretty much impossible.  
 But of course, Paul isn't speaking literally.  
 He doesn't mean  
 that Christians aren't allowed to sleep in.  
 It's not the oblivion of sleep  
 but the oblivion of life  
 when you're so distracted by everything going on around you  
 that you don't even have a chance  
 to see what's actually going on.  
 You know that feeling,  
 when you are so busy  
 that time seems to pass you by,  
 and suddenly you wake up  
 and weeks, or even months have passed.  
 It's something most of us experience  
 pretty regularly;  
 I know that I felt like that yesterday  
 when I went outside to try to deal with the leaves  
 and realized that I needed gloves and a hat.  
 Some time in the last couple of weeks, in reality if not officially,  
 winter had begun.  
 The same thing  
 can happen with our faith.

Eugene Petersen, in his retelling of Scripture, puts it this way:  
 "Make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day  
 obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God."

We can get so busy  
 that we lose touch  
 with God.  
 We skip church on Sunday  
 because it seems to be the only time we can fit time with the family  
 in among the sports and shopping and work.  
 We skip bible study so we can get household tasks done.

We drift away from our habits of daily bible reading and prayer.

And if you're like me, you justify it by saying,  
Just wait till things get a bit more sane. I'll catch up with God then.  
But of course,  
things stay pretty much as they always were,  
and the longer I go  
without paying attention to God,  
the harder it is  
to get back to it.

But no! Paul says.  
Because you might never get back to it. And you know,  
that second coming of Christ  
might just happen  
while you're too busy  
with everything else.  
And you might miss it.

Now most of us aren't like Paul.  
We're not really expecting that Christ will come  
any day.  
Even though  
that what the bible says.  
After all, we have history on our side.  
It's been 2000 years  
and Christ hasn't made his second appearance yet.  
The odds are  
it won't happen in 2010 either.  
The urgency isn't there.

Except you know,  
it is urgent. Because while we assume  
that Christ isn't coming  
anytime soon,  
we don't know for sure.  
Plus we don't know for sure  
how long we ourselves will live.

Earlier this year  
my uncle went for a check up at his doctor.  
He was fit and healthy  
as far as he knew.

But the doctor found otherwise.  
He had cancer,  
and within three months  
he was dead.  
And at the conference I was at last week,  
I heard of the death of the husband of one of the people there.  
It was a heart attack. He was 51.  
And how many times have we heard of teenagers  
killed in car accidents.  
The point isn't to scare you.  
It's to say  
we don't know how long we'll live.  
We don't know  
how soon we will meet Christ,  
if not at the second coming,  
at the time of our death.

Scripture is clear. This is urgent.  
So get yourself ready. Now.  
That's what Isaiah and Matthew tell us;  
but it's Romans that puts it in practical terms.

Live honorably. Don't waste time, or spend your energy getting drunk. Don't sleep around,  
don't be quarrelsome, or pick fights,  
or get obsessed with what other people have and you don't.

Of course, none of us would do any of those things, would we?

Yeah, right.

Paul knows  
human nature.  
And especially human nature  
when people get together.  
Even in the church.

Instead, we're supposed to be like Christ.  
Paul describes it  
as if we are putting on a set of clothes, putting on the same clothes  
that Christ did. In his letter to the Colossians  
he uses the same image  
but gives us more detail:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

That's the blueprint for the church  
as we wait  
for Christ to come again.  
And the blueprint for our own individual lives.

So get ready!  
Wake up, get dressed!  
Be ready  
for Christ.  
Who has come as the baby in the manger  
and will come  
as the judge and salvation of all,  
and is here  
present among us.  
Get ready!