

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent “The Forgotten Season”

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Have you noticed how all the malls around the world went straight from Thanksgiving to Christmas in a blink of an eye? Even in my neighborhood, everyone seems to compete to find out who can put up their Christmas lights the fastest following Thanksgiving. There was at least one house in my neighborhood that had the Christmas thing going even before Thanksgiving. I was befuddled by that, but then I read an article from USA Today that quoted some study that evidently decorating for Christmas early can be psychologically beneficial. And so, I got thinking, why not after the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, who is with me? It does seem jarring, however, that we go so quickly from Thanksgiving to the Christmas season in our culture. Every store out there is decorated with evergreens and tinsel. There is Christmas music wherever you go. And then you come to Church and what do you see? Well, you don't see Christmas trees in the sanctuary. You don't see poinsettias or Christmas lights. Instead of the green, red, and gold that you see everywhere else, in here you are welcomed with the color violet, a jarringly different color. And violet is most appropriate for this time of year. Violet is the color of the sky just after the darkest hour of night that offers a hint that dawn is nearing the horizon. In addition to the color violet, we have a wreath with four candles with only one lit this weekend, which means we are clearly keeping vigil and we have several weeks yet to go.

You see, instead of launching straight into Christmas after Thanksgiving, we recognize there is another season in between, a more or less forgotten season, the season of Advent. And there are two themes the Season of Advent explores. The first theme unites our hearts with the ancient Hebrews who kept vigil for centuries awaiting the coming of the Messiah. You see this theme clearly in our first reading from Jeremiah. Jeremiah proclaims, “The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah. In those days, in that time, I will raise up for David a just shoot; he shall do what is right and just in the land.”

The second theme of Advent calls us all to keep vigil for the return of Jesus at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. We can see that theme clearly in our Gospel reading, Jesus says that at the end of time, after many tribulations, “They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.”

You may recall, I spoke at length about apocalyptic language a couple weeks ago. That homily is on my website if you wish to better understand and interpret this genre. For this weekend, I just want us to reflect on how these two themes of Advent, joining our hearts to the ancient Hebrews awaiting the Messiah and the call to keep vigil for the second coming of Jesus at the end of time, stand in a really stark contrast to our popular culture right now that went straight to Christmas day even before the turkey made it to the fridge.

You see, my friends, as wonderful as Christmas will be this year, and I pray it will be a wonderful season for us all, I think there is something really spiritually healthy about the Advent season, of uniting our hearts with the ancient Hebrews who longed for centuries for the birth of Christ. There is something spiritually healthy about keeping vigil for the return of Christ at the end of time and the challenge to live our lives accordingly. I think the invitation this first weekend of Advent offers us is to give ourselves the time in the coming weeks to truly experience this liturgical season before launching headlong into Christmas. Even if you have already put up your Christmas decorations, it is still possible to celebrate Advent by simply spending more time in prayer each day. Along those lines, families can have an advent wreath of their own on their dining room table, incorporate the lighting of the candles into their meal time prayers together. We can also make the effort at some point during Advent to read the Christmas story as found in the Gospel of St. Matthew and St. Luke, perhaps focusing more on St. Luke as we have entered a new liturgical year. We can also find ways to be more charitable to the people in need in our community during this season of Advent, by participating in our giving tree, helping out our St. Vincent de Paul ministry, our African Orphan Program, or just by reaching out to those who are lonely or in need in our neighborhoods. There are so many ways to celebrate the Advent season so to keep vigil for Christ in meaningful ways.

I think St. Paul gives us the best advice as to how to open our hearts to Advent this year when he says in our Second Reading, “Brothers and sisters: May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones.” Good advice!

And so, my friends, we have lit the first candle. We have begun our solemn vigil. And even though Christmas light are going up everywhere, as fun as all of that is, during Advent we are sincerely invited to not lose sight of the light that is beginning to appear just beyond the horizon. As we journey towards Christmas, we await the return of the light of the world and may he come soon, for he lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.