

1st Sunday of Advent “Reset your Compass to Christ”

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In the Gospel today, Jesus offers us a message that is both a warning and a consolation as we look to the future. Jesus said to his disciples: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Let’s stop there for a moment.

Jesus’ words here are to be understood under the same tradition as we see in places like the Book of Daniel, the Book of Revelation, etc. The rhetorical genre here is called “apocalyptic”. The word apocalypse doesn’t mean the end of the world, but rather “unveiling”. We translate the Greek word “apokalypsis” into the English word “revelation”. Jesus is telling his disciples that something new is about to be revealed.

You see, as I mentioned recently in a previous homily, the people of Jesus’ day did not have watches, or GPS devices, etc. They were able to tell time and get their directions from the sun, the moon and the stars. They believed that the sun, the moon and the stars were governed by cosmic forces which provided people knowledge of what time of day it was and what direction to travel as we make our way through life. What Jesus is saying here is that there will be a day when the cosmic forces that give us direction in life will be in dismay, and this will be a great cause for concern. People will be frightened because the compasses they relied on in life will not work anymore. And we do not need the end of the world for this to happen, a midlife crisis will do. Depression or disillusionment can cause our moral compasses to spin as well. How about the evening news? When the things in our world that give us direction fail, Jesus continues by saying, “And then 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.”

What Jesus is saying here is that the apokalypsis, the great unveiling and revelation, isn’t some future cataclysm. Jesus is referring to his passion, death and resurrection. You see, along with the sun, moon and stars, one of the greatest certainties we all have as we make our way through life is that we are all destined to die someday. We don’t need the sun, moon and stars to tell us that. Because of the resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that death is not the end. We no longer have to govern our lives over fears of our mortality. We no longer have to navigate our lives by the light of the sun, the moon or the stars. As disciples of Jesus, we now navigate our lives by the light of Christ who alone has power over death itself, who alone shines a light onto the path of salvation. We will all stand before him someday.

And this is a wonderful way to begin the Season of Advent. You see, my friends, Advent is a liturgical season marked by two very important themes. The first theme is apocalyptic, we take time to remember that everything in this world is transitory. We remember that the light of the sun, moon, stars, and the lights of popular culture around us will dim and fade. We focus our attention and set the compasses of our hearts towards the light of the Risen Christ as we await with vigilance his return in glory. That is the first theme of Advent.

The second theme of Advent is marked by uniting our hearts and minds with the ancient Jews like Jeremiah who kept vigil in wait for the birth of the Messiah on Christmas morning. We are all familiar with this second theme. This second theme, preparing for the birthday of Jesus, loses all its power unless we truly take the time to seriously contemplate the first theme of Advent.

The first theme invites us to do a spiritual inventory of all the lights in the world we tend to follow, whether it be politics or politicians, news commentators, world events, worries around the workplace, or the dramas that unfold in the family. Perhaps a few of us are a little worried about Omicron and what that might mean for us and for the world going forward. Whatever is leading our hearts into worry or fear right now, we are invited to reset our compasses on the light of the Risen Christ who will come again in glory.

Even the liturgical color of this season, violet, points to this theme. Violet is the color just after the darkest time of night. It is that color of the sky just as morning begins to dawn, the first hint of light on the horizon. As a people of Advent, that is where we find ourselves many times during life. We find ourselves in a dark place, looking for the light of dawn on the horizon. We also start out with only one candle lit on our Advent wreath. Each Sunday as we get closer to Christmas another candle is lit symbolizing that the Light of the World is coming and coming soon. For Christians, the Light of the World is the Risen Christ who is just over the horizon as we make our life's journey.

My friends, we make that journey together as Church, St. Paul gives us good advice as to how best to approach 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."

On this first Sunday of Advent, we have lit the first candle. We have begun our solemn vigil. Whatever is causing us to worry right now, we are called to turn our gaze to the light of Christ dawning on the horizon that promises hope for our salvation. Jesus is our morning star. He is our compass to navigate through difficult days.