

# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Jake W. Dell, Deacon

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## Advent: Misfit of Seasons

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, December 23, 2012*

*The Fourth Sunday of Advent*

*Based on Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1:39-45*

Have you noticed that Advent is a season that doesn't quite fit? Nothing about it fits. It doesn't play nice with the festivities going on around it. Most of us spend the weeks leading up to Christmas, well, celebrating Christmas—it's "the holidays," after all.

Even in the church, Advent doesn't sit well. The readings don't fit. The prophecies concerning Jesus don't quite fit the reality of Jesus—neither the Jesus we meet in the New Testament, nor the Jesus most of us have met in our hearts.

Take our reading today from Micah. Jesus never actually becomes a ruler of Israel. The scattered tribes of Israel are never reunited, nor do they live securely in the land that was once promised to them. And while Jesus does attain some notoriety and fame during his short life, he doesn't quite live up to the expectations set for him by Micah or by any of the prophets who were writing—supposedly about him.

Now let me make myself clear. I actually do believe that Jesus was and is the Messiah. And I think that the prophets had a lot to say about Jesus. But over the past 2,000 years a cottage industry of sorts has sprung up among Christian preachers and writers trying to make all of these prophecies fit together neatly. For instance, one venerable way of observing Advent is to focus our attention on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. That makes Advent about Judgment Day. But again—and you're free to tell me otherwise—it doesn't seem to me that getting excited for Judgment Day fits too well in this time between Thanksgiving and Christmas. This way of keeping Advent is less about waiting for him to be born again in our hearts and more about waiting for Jesus to come back to earth and to finish what he started.

One of my favorite hymns—both for its music and its theology—is "Lo, He Comes With Clouds Descending." Listen as I recite the last stanza from the hymn:

*"Yea, amen! Let all adore thee, /  
High on thine eternal throne; /  
Savior, take the power and glory; /  
Claim the kingdom for thine own: /  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! /  
Thou shalt reign, and thou alone."*

As much as we love it when Jesus is resurrected on Easter Day, we're just not content to let the story end then and there. These prophecies—they still have too much vigor and force in them, don't they? They still have too much forward momentum. They demand that we do something with them. They demand to be fulfilled.

So Advent gives us a chance to trot them back out and revel in their promise of deliverance from evil, violence and oppression. At the same time, however, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is depicted as an unprecedented day of violence and destruction. So when the Prince of Peace returns to—yes—rule the earth, a lot of people are going to have to die first. There's going to be a lot of wreckage and carnage.

It's going to be so bad that scripture tells us that the righteous will be taken up into the air to meet the Lord as he descends on a cloud—hence the title of the hymn. Elsewhere in Matthew's gospel, we are told that God will cut short this time of tribulation so that the rest of us have a chance to survive it and finally meet Jesus face to face. By that point, I am not sure that I would need or even want to.

I don't think I can stand to hear any more stories of children being murdered, or any more stories of buildings being blown up. I especially don't want to hear that this violence is the harbinger of my

Savior's Second Coming foretold in scripture long ago. Advent truly is the misfit season of the Church Year.

But somehow—and maybe you'll just have to trust me when I tell you this—the prophecies we read during Advent were meant to sound comforting. They were meant to comfort an exiled and scattered people. Don't think of ancient Israel so much as a country—the way you might think of England or the United States. Instead, think of it more as a large, extended family.

And then think of the prophets. Think of them as trying to comfort and reconcile this family with the hope of better things to come. Specifically, the prophets announced to the tribes of Israel that they were going to be gathered together and that they were about to be given their land back. The same land that Abraham had been promised; the same land that Moses had led them to; and the same land that Joshua had conquered for them.

For the tribes of Israel in exile and for the Jews living under Roman rule, the coming of the Messiah meant that their advent—their long period of waiting—was coming to an end. But it didn't happen that way. Jesus disappointed a lot of his followers and was eventually killed by the Romans. So their advent wasn't over, after all.

I suspect Advent will linger in Newtown, Connecticut this year. For many of the victims' families, "Advent" —that curious season of longing, and waiting and hoping for something better . . . That curious season that doesn't play nice with the other parts of life . . . That season . . . that season may be the only season they'll know for a long time. Possibly for the rest of their lives.

On Christmas Eve, many of us, including me, will have a very hard time believing that the light is shining in the darkness. On Christmas morning, many of us, including me, will have a very hard time believing that the darkness is not winning. Maybe, in fact, if we're honest, we'll admit to ourselves that the darkness seems to have already won. Yes. Once again the darkness has won.

The darkness won again in Newtown, just as it did in Oregon before; just as it did in Aurora, just as it did in Wisconsin, and just as it did in . . . and . . . well, I don't have to recite the whole, long, sad list for you. Perhaps the darkness is winning even now as I am preaching—for, unlike a prophet from the Old Testament—I can't stand here and tell you with that kind of confidence that tomorrow evening, sometime around midnight, a Savior is going to be born—a Savior who will put everything right; someone who will put things back to the way they were meant to be.

I wouldn't dare preach that with a straight face given recent events. Those words are not mine to speak. I am not a prophet. I am not a messiah. Neither was Elizabeth. She was not a prophet. Neither was Mary. She was not a messiah. But Elizabeth was the mother of the prophet John; and Mary was the mother of Jesus the Messiah.

Since the Gospel reading for today only gives us Elizabeth's words, perhaps we should let her words be our words in these, the waning hours of this difficult and unworkable season. In a loud voice Elizabeth exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leapt for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Today, I am going to claim Elizabeth's blessing. Today, I am going to believe with Mary. Today, I am declaring to you that I believe that somehow the Lord will keep his promises. Today, I am going to humble myself and acknowledge that God is God and that I am not.

And tomorrow, when we gather once more to welcome the Christ Child back into the world, I am going to pray that something inside of us might leap for joy—and that together, in our joy, we will stand up to—and defeat—the darkness.

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