

Divergence on the Lectionary - The First Sunday of Advent, Year A

First Reading

Isaiah 2:1–5

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 13:11–14

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 24:36–44

“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

As we begin a new liturgical year, we begin a new cycle, one that always starts with the anticipation of the Lord’s return. The season of Advent holds up both the anticipation of the birth of the Holy Child in Bethlehem and the hope of His second Advent which will bring the restoration of all things. Here in the earliest Sunday of Advent the focus is entirely on the latter.

There is a theme that actually manages to thread its way through all three lessons for this Sunday. I started out to try to write separately about that theme for all three lessons, but I wound up writing about the theme more than the lessons. I do apologize for not being more text specific.

In order to see the way that theme fits all three lessons, though, we need to include some context for Isaiah - the verses that come right before our reading for this week.

Isaiah 1:27–31

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.

For they shall be ashamed of the oaks
that you desired;
and you shall blush for the gardens
that you have chosen.
For you shall be like an oak
whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.
And the strong shall become tinder,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with none to quench them. (ESV)

It's worth remembering here that this passage I just quoted isn't really separated by anything from our reading for this week. Yes, our reading begins chapter a new chapter, but the books of the Hebrew Scriptures had no chapters (or verse numbers) until many centuries after they were written. At best there is sometimes spacing like a paragraph. So these readings are sequential, linked.

There always seems to be this tension between the coming of destruction and the vision of God's redeemed creation, living in the light of God's mercy and justice. Just two weeks ago Jesus spoke of the wars and insurrections to come, all this before His return. This week He tells us that the days of His coming will be like the days of Noah. In our reading from Isaiah the prophet sees Zion humbled and ashamed of the things in which she'd taken pride when her glory was the Lord. All this must happen before the establishment of the mountain of the House of the Lord. It seems inevitable.

There are three mistaken responses to this tide of woes that I've seen in my life.

The first is to try to hold it back. I don't find any biblical warrant for trying to prevent the downfall of structures that are destined to collapse, that aren't grounded in the Goodness and Mercy of God. We're called to pray for those in authority (heaven knows their job's impossible enough) but not to keep shoring up seawalls that cannot withstand the storms forever. It reminds me of my former home on Oak Island. We spent millions of dollars rebuilding the beach in recent years, only to see most of that swept away by the most recent hurricane. And that wasn't even a bad hurricane.

The tragedy of trying to hold back the collapse of the house built on sand is that we become exhausted and overwhelmed. Just like the residents of Oak Island who tire of seeing their taxes washed away year after year, I see good-hearted Christians become overworn as the flood of collapse continues to build. All too often I see this exhaustion evolve into anger, even bitterness that can and does poison the good work they try to do.

The second error that I've seen, especially of late, and perhaps the most abhorrent, is to try to hasten the process by adding to the tensions, adding to the conflict, adding to the destruction. The reasoning seems to go, "Well, if the Kingdom follows on all these wars and earthquakes and storms, let's add fuel to the fire so as to hasten the Kingdom's arrival!" There is almost a gleeful approach to stirring up conflict in the Middle East, a disregard for the pain it will cause. There comes from it also a callous indifference to the destruction of the environment. As if by destroying this one we can hurry God along in giving us a new heaven and a new earth. I'm reminded of Dudley, Harry Potter's cousin, who routinely destroyed the gifts given to him, fully expecting more and better gifts to take their place. I guess that would make God like Vernon or Petunia Dursley in that world view. That just makes me shudder!

The third and probably the most disappointing is just to ignore the signs of the tsunami that's hurtling towards us. "Oh, it's not really that bad, we don't really need to change much to fix it," seems to be the approach. It's like watching the tides rush out from the beach, knowing what it means, and just moving your chairs closer to the water so you can keep your feet wet. Jesus taught us to be mindful of the signs of the times, and we are fully capable of reading them. I think that Paul's admonition not to walk "in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy," is most connected to this kind of error. These are things we who know better do to dull our senses, to hide from what we see, to avoid confronting the truth we know.

A great wave is coming. We cannot hold it back, and heaven knows we're not called to set off a massive bomb offshore to speed it up, but we can point to the receding ocean and suggest that people move to higher ground. We can develop our life-saving skills, our first-aid skills, so that we'll be more effective at rendering assistance when the time comes. Most of all, we can make sure that when the storm is unleashed our feet are firmly planted and that we will be able to hold through the tempest so that others might hang on to us.

We don't abandon the city and run for cover, or build bigger stronger walls that still won't work, but we find a sturdy place to stand. We don't abandon the earth, neither do we in our desperation resort to violence to save it, but we prepare to care for others when climate change engulfs them.

But most of all, we "cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." And that armor? It's our unshakeable faith in the Goodness and Mercy of God, in the power of the Blood of God's Son. That is our seawall, that is our anchor.

As I was writing this I recalled the words of an old hymn. I'll close with those.

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name

Chorus

On Christ the solid rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand

When darkness veils his lovely face
I rest on His unchanging grace
In every high and stormy gale
My anchor holds within the veil
Chorus

His oath, his covenant, his blood
Supports me in the 'whelming flood
When all around my soul gives way
He then is all my hope and stay
Chorus

When He shall come with trumpet sound
Oh may I then in Him be found
Dressed in his righteousness alone
Faultless to stand before the throne
Chorus