

**A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina, on Advent 2 (5 December
2004):**

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

THE MARKS OF ADVENT

Advent: Borrowing a line from what Rodney Dangerfield was prone to say, it is the season of time and life that "don't get no respect."

Squashed and pushed aside at the beginning by the Thanksgiving holiday, Advent recovers somewhat about this time every December to emerge with a small window of opportunity. We listen earnestly to Advent's message and try as best we can to get a hold of its meaning, but our common experience finds its themes to be a bit too complex, too demanding to grasp. Besides which, with our energy and focus under the holiday siege, the pressures of Christmas soon sweep over us like a huge ocean wave, and poor little Advent is swept away like so many sand castles on the beach. As a result, Advent is a neglected and, to truth to tell, an unrecognized season of God's time, of God's experience, of God's grace. And personally this makes me very sad.

I make this confession to you because I do feel some despair over this. Like the proverbial Dutch boy with his fingers in the dike, I wonder if insisting upon honoring Advent is worth the effort. But I know that it is. For if we bother to unwrap Advent and - even when it is called for - to cleanse Advent from the distortions that have glommed onto it, what we find is a period of time and spiritual experience that is as practical as it is real.

For Advent is where and how you and I are called to live as Christians on a daily basis. Its complex themes and challenging disciplines describe a practical and realistic spirituality that shows us how to be in the world but not of it.

This morning I want to share with you my passion for and my need of Advent in the hopes of touching your passion and need, the result of which might be a deepening our faith's joy and a strengthening of our desire for God. I say this because Advent speaks to the reality of our existence between two worlds, two Advents. The first Advent culminated by Jesus' death and resurrection, and the second Advent will come, when all that Jesus started is finished and all will see what God sees.

In order to make this clear, in this sermon I want to mention some of the essential marks of Advent so that in the midst of December's demands and pressures (which are the demands and pressures of our lives), you and I may not lose our way or miss what Christmas is actually about.

Having said this, allow me first to point out that Advent's meaning is not primarily derived from Christmas. In fact, to leap directly from Advent to Christmas is risk missing the big picture by focusing on the birth of Jesus rather than coming to grips with Emmanuel: God with us.

What I am suggesting to you is this. Christ's birth is a wonderful beginning; but it is only a beginning of the final act of God's plan. And in this light, Advent's scope is much larger than what occurs in Bethlehem. Christmas starts the final phase of something that God intends to complete. And what we are called to

realize is that if we desire real life, then Advent (and all life) are about dealing with Emmanuel: God with us, and what it takes to be in Communion.

In this vein, I believe that the more we are aware of the marks of Advent, the more we will put ourselves in a position to live realistically and practically in and with and by the presence of God.

So, what are some of those Advent marks? Today's scriptures point to several. They are, for instance, hope, preparation, repentance, watching, and waiting. And all of these Advent characteristics are embodied by the season's poster boy, John the Baptist. As a way of encouraging our familiarity with Advent's call to Communion, let me briefly spell these marks out and then give you a real-life example of them in action.

Hope: in this morning's lesson from Romans St. Paul says the following: "Whatever was written [biblically] in former days was written for our instruction, that that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." 1

The church has always struggled with Advent, just as you and I do. I think the struggle centers on Advent's stereophonic message. On one channel is a hard and even terrifyingly off-putting message that tells us in no uncertain terms that the life we manage to make for ourselves will not last. It will end, and as a result we will be left with the gnawing sentiments of the old torch singer, Peggy Lee, wondering: "Is that all there is?"

Advent speaks unabashedly about the fact that what we know, what we have built, what we have boasted about will end: "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." While the truth of this message is undeniable, it still offends, and it can also threaten us.

But there is another part to Advent's message, a second channel to Advent's tune; and it is the message of God's promise and hope that springs from these ashes. As the source of light and life, God's will is to give us what we need and cannot provide for ourselves: namely, eternal life, lasting life. And in the risen Christ, we see what God sees: fear and death in their proper, divinely ordained perspective. Consequently, we have hope.

So it is that Advent speaks of real hope, a hope that is founded upon what we see in Jesus and, by God's grace, what we ultimately will see in one another.

From this hope that has already emerged in Christ but has not yet taken full root in us, we confront the essential message of the gospel, and we hear it today on the lips of John the Baptist. It is the very message that our Lord, himself, adopts, once his public ministry commences. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."2

John the Baptist will never be confused with Mr. Rogers (of "Be my neighbor" fame). But in spite of the apparent harshness of his message, the gospel reports that hoards of people came out to him, leaving the comfort of their lives to see him and hear him in the wilderness. Some of them even endured his scathing welcome ("You brood of vipers...") because they knew the Baptizer was speaking a necessary truth. They had to turn their lives around, if they were going to engage with life as God knows it, if Communion would be a thing to grasp.

So, John the Baptist utters Advent's imperative: "Repent," a word that means "turn around; change your mind and your heart, because God's kingdom is at hand, so close you will be able to touch it, if you and I will only face it and see.

I was reminded by a colleague the other day of one of the adages of Alcoholics Anonymous. "You can't think your way into new behavior, but you can behave your way into new thinking." This modern proverb has a lot of Advent in it. Turn around. There are things you can do to face God. Open your eyes and see your Lord's embracing arms reaching out - for you - in Communion -- even on the cross. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Prepare the way. For God is coming to you. Watch. Wait. This is God's time.

When I saw the media reports of people camping out in front of stores such as "Best Buy" the Friday after Thanksgiving and sandwiching their way through the doors once the shopping began, I wondered what it was they were really searching for. I wondered if they would really find something that would make their lives better. Or were they headed in the wrong direction?

How much would be enough? Clearly, they were in the wilderness; and so are we. But the voice crying out to them and to you and me to repent, to turn around in order to see that we do not need to grab for what we think will save us. No, God is coming to us to hand-deliver what will make us whole, if we'd just prepare the way.

Advent is real. It is where you and I live. The question is: Will we recognize what Advent brings to us; or will we just shop for something new?

I said that I wanted to identify some of Advent's marks as a way of clarifying how close to our bone this season actually is (which may be the real reason we choose to ignore Advent), but now I also want to tell you a story about something that is going on with one this parish's families right now that is very much about the living of Advent's reality and meaning.

The name Mike Clarkin is familiar to many of you. He is Mike and Nancy Waite's son-in-law, married to their oldest daughter, Allison. I had the privilege of officiating at their wedding three summers ago and was very excited to learn earlier this fall that Allison was pregnant with their first child. But a few weeks ago, Mike suffered a devastating accident at work. A four ton shipping container, hanging high above the ground, collapsed and fell to the ground, crushing Mike's car while Mike was sitting inside. He has been in a Charleston hospital for over two weeks now, the most pressing problem being that he is in a coma. Both sides of the family have been keeping vigil, but what captivates me is his wife, Allison's behavior. It speaks very powerfully of Advent's reality, which is (as I am suggesting) the reality of living our faith every day in this in-between time.

Allison sits for hours by the bedside, waiting and watching with a powerful hope that can only come from love. She speaks to her husband in soft, reassuring terms, tells him of their baby's development and growth, but mostly she is present. She holds his hand; she strokes his arm; she waits and watches, in the same manner that one is present at Communion.

Her waiting is not an empty waiting. Her watching is not with glazed, unentertained eyes. No, she waits for her husband in the same manner that she awaits her unborn child.

This watching and waiting are not on her time, by her clock but God's, and Allison knows this. She watches with eyes that see more than can commonly be seen, for she sees the reality of her love for her husband, a love that is grounded in God's love; which is the hope that this love is stronger than death.

While it is still a touchy medical situation, the sense I get from Mike and Nancy as they report what they are witnessing is that Mike will make it, but his life will emerge in the same way that their child will emerge. His recovery will not be something any of us control or predict, but it will come. It is Advent. It is, in a profound way, always Advent for us.

I will close by referring to another expression of Advent's reality and meaning. It comes from the words of the Proper Preface for Advent that highlights our Eucharistic celebration. (You can find these words in your Prayer Book on page 345/378. Obviously, you will hear them very shortly in the liturgy.) They speak of the big picture, which is Advent, which is our hope, our life. Listen.

Because you sent your beloved Son to redeem us from sin and death, and to make us heirs in him of everlasting life; that when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing.

This is our hope: that the harsh sounding call that Advent offers is to speak to the hurt we cause ourselves and the world when we turn our backs on God.; that the gracious Good News is that our God comes to us to judge the world for one purpose - so that we might come home - with no shame, no fear, just joy at being loved so much.

O come, o come, Emmanuel. Amen.

(1) Romans 15:4

(2) Matthew 3:2