

A Sermon for Advent 1, Year B  
November 30, 2014 :: Isaiah 64:1-9 & Mark 13:24-37  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *“Advent: It’s Not Always What We Expect.”*

One holiday season many years ago, the Cook family traveled to Wichita KS to spend some time with Peggy’s parents, John and Suzy Roper. One lazy afternoon, John and I thought we would go to the movies.

Ever the gracious host, John asked me if there was a particular film that I wanted to see. I told him I had heard about a new movie which starred John Travolta and another prominent black actor/ entertainer, that sounded pretty interesting. John was open to the idea, so I checked the newspaper to see if it was still playing, and where and when it was showing. Now, I couldn’t remember the name of the film, so I simply looked for any film starring John Travolta. I found what I thought was the film, and so John and I headed to the theater.

In the end, John thought it was one of the worst films— if not *the* worst film— he had ever seen. I, however, liked the film; but all throughout the movie, I kept thinking to myself, “This is not what I expected; it’s nothing like the reviewer’s description.” It took a while but I finally figured out what went wrong: the film I had intended for us to see was *White Man’s Burden*, starring John Travolta and Harry Belafonte; the film we actually saw was *Pulp Fiction*, starring John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson. Definitely not the same picture!

I tell this story because, sometimes, the first Sunday in Advent can have a similarly jarring effect on people. After all, we’ve just finished with our wonderful Thanksgiving celebrations— we may even still be feeling the pleasant buzz of our tryptophan-laced turkey— and it’s likely we’re already looking forward to the Christmas holidays. It’s a really great time of the year!

But then we come to Sunday worship, and the lector begins the reading from Isaiah:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence...”

It's not exactly what we expected, but sometimes those old prophets could get testy and grumpy; maybe the gospel will be better. But in fact, the gospel reading is worse:

“In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

What's going on? The effect is probably not so very different from *thinking* that you're going to see *White Man's Burden* but instead it turns out to be *Pulp Fiction*. It's like: “Are we in the right place? Why on earth are we hearing these particular passages of scripture?”

Well, what's going on is the fact that today is the first Sunday in the Season of Advent. And one of the purposes of Advent is to remind us of why God had to come to us in Christ in the first place. And to that end, particular Bible readings are selected, and certain hymns are sung, for the specific purpose of keeping us from rushing through the month of December to Christmas Day, without taking the time to ponder why we needed God to intervene in our lives, and think about what we must do to be ready for God's next intervention.

Our first reading this morning, from *Isaiah*, was written in that period of time when the people of Israel were returning from their exile in Babylon, only to find that their God-given homeland was in ruins. And as they looked upon the devastation and destruction, they were profoundly aware that they brought this upon themselves; that their behavior, not only as individuals, but

also as a nation, had led to this. And they are sorry. They remember to good things God did for them in the past; how God led them, and provided for them: as is described in verse 4 of that reading:

“From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him,”

They remember the bad they’ve done, which has led to their current predicament, and they remember the good that God did for them in the past. And they repent. They are deeply sorrowful for what they have done— and we’re not talking about sorrow as a noun, as a feeling, a sentiment, or an emotion— but sorrow as a verb, as an action, as a positive move in a new direction, and as the act of turning from going their own way and turning to go in the way of God.

And in verse 8, the prophet asks that God not only forgive the people, but also to restore, renew, remake them:

“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

So, here’s the thing: Advent is a time when we truly look at ourselves, and at the world around us, and are reminded that we still need God. It’s a time for deep and serious reflection upon the way in which we have lived our lives; to see if the path we’ve been following has been supportive of God’s will and purpose for the world, or if it has been a hindrance. Advent may therefore be a time of reorientation; a time of redirecting the course of our lives, so that they are in line with the way God would have us go.

Advent is a time to wait; and specifically, a time to wait for God to come. But this is not a hopeless and helpless waiting, where we alternate between wishfulness and despair. No, Advent waiting is, in the words of Jesus, which we heard in today’s gospel reading, a time for being “alert,” and awake”; watching

not the sky, but the world; looking for those times and places where opportunities for mission and ministry present themselves.

On a side note, it turns out to be a happy coincidence that today, November 30<sup>th</sup>, is not only the First Sunday of Advent, also it also turns out to be the Feast Day of St. Andrew the Apostle, this church's namesake. Now, we don't know much about Andrew except for the following: he's always mentioned in any list of the followers of Jesus; he was one of the first people to become a disciple of Jesus; his first act as a disciple was to invite his brother to join them (incidentally, his brother's name was Simon, but Jesus later changed Simon's name to Peter, a.k.a. "the Rock"); and for this reason, Andrew has been called the first missionary of the followers of Jesus; Andrew was the disciple who brought the boy, who had the 5 loaves of bread and two fish, to Jesus for the feeding of the multitude; one early church historian (Eusebius) records Andrew as having taken his ministry into the region of modern-day Iran; and, finally, Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland. And as it turns out, Andrew becomes a good role model for how we might make the best of this Advent.

Because, Advent is a time to open ourselves up to the possibility that the God of all our yesterdays, has a new and exciting tomorrow in store for us. And rather than looking ahead with fear, Advent challenges us to look to the future with faith and hope, spending our days serving those around us in need, but also always on the lookout for more needs to fill, and more people to love.

Amen.