

Advent 01 B 2017  
December 3, 2017. Isaiah 64:1-9 & Mark 13:24-37  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *“This Isn’t What We Expected!”*

Happy new year! And I say that because today is the first day of the new church year. And the church year begins on the first Sunday in the Season of Advent. That’s today. And that’s why our vestments are purple instead of green. And so, today is the start of a fresh, new year. And new things can be kind of exciting.

And what’s more, we’re probably still feeling the tryptophan-laced buzz from the Thanksgiving holidays just a week passed; and doubtless we’re looking forward to the Christmas holidays, only about three weeks down the road. And so, we probably came to church this morning feeling pretty good.

But then, our lector offered up the reading from the prophet Isaiah, which began like this:

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

At which we thought: “That’s kind of a downer, but maybe the gospel will be better.” And, how did the gospel begin? Like this:

Jesus said, “In those days, after that suffering (even right now you know this will not end well), 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.”

And at that point, we’re probably looking at the people around us, trying to gage their reactions to what’s going on, and thinking, “You know, this *isn’t* what I expected!” All of which reminds me of something that happened several years ago.

Peggy and I were in Wichita, KS to spend a few days with her parents. One afternoon, my father-in-law and I decided to go to go to the movies. He asked 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, that sounded pretty interesting. He was open to the idea, so I checked the newspaper to see 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 and a prominent black actor. I found a film that fit that description, and so we hopped into the car and headed to the theater.

Afterwards, on the drive home, my father-in-law told me that he thought it was *one* of the worst films — if not *the* worst film — he had ever seen. But I, however, liked the film; although (and like some you here this morning) all throughout the movie, I kept thinking to myself, “This is not what I expected. It’s nothing like the reviewer’s description.” And it took a while for me to figure out what had happened, and it was this: You see, 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 film! And definitely not what I expected.

And that’s sort of my point: Sometimes the experience of going to church on the first Sunday of Advent can be similar to the experience of people who think they’re going to see *White Man’s Burden* and end up seeing *Pulp Fiction*. And it’s like: “Are we even

in the right place? And what is going on with these awful Bible readings?”

Well, what’s going on is the fact that one of the main purposes of the Season of Advent is to get us to slow down, and prevent us from rushing from Thanksgiving to Christmas, and instead take some time to do some serious reflection, and to ask ourselves things like:

What have been our priorities during this past year?

What have we been striving for?

What has been our driving passion?

And, perhaps most importantly:

Have these things been in line with Jesus’ command that we love one another as he loved us?

My own experience with such times of reflection, is the inescapable conclusion is that I still need God, and God's help, and God's grace. Maybe it's the same for you. And that means that the Season of Advent may also be a time of reorientation; a time of redirecting the course of our lives; a time of repentance; with our goal being that everything that we say, do, and think, *from this point onward* is congruent with God's will for us.

And so, all this can make the Season of Advent a challenging time, but also an exciting time, if we put forth the effort.

Now, something else that's exciting is also happening this morning, on this first Sunday in Advent: In a few minutes, we're going to be witnessing the baptism of two young men, and I want to spend a couple of minutes talking about that, and what baptism means..

The first thing I want to mention is that *all* of us are children of God. That's not something we earned or achieved; that's simply who we are by virtue of having a pulse and respiration. And baptism plays no role in that. It's simply who we are. All of us.

But baptism is about what we do. And who we follow.  
Baptism is about choosing to follow the way of Jesus. It's about choosing the particular path that we are going to follow, the Way we are going to go.

And so, by virtue of our birth, we are the children of God.  
And by virtue of our baptism, we become people of a particular Way.

In short, and by virtue of our baptism, we are declaring:

That being compassionate people is a better way of life than being intolerant people.

That pursuing peace in every situation is a better way of life than quickly resorting to conflict.

That being generous people is a better way of life than being meager people.

That being welcoming people is a better way of life, than being unaccepting people.

And that being honest with people in all things is a better way of life than simply saying or doing whatever is necessary to get our way.

And when we witness someone being baptized, as we will in a few minutes, we are reminded that, like those being baptized, we too once decided to follow a particular way: the way of Jesus. And, what's more important, is that we are given the opportunity to renew our commitment to that Way.

And so, this first Sunday in Advent is new and exciting for a number of reasons. Certainly, it's the start of a new church year; a brand new and fresh opportunity. But it's also an opportunity to renew our own lives of faith, and our journey with God; to focus, with renewed attention, on the path we are going to follow from this moment forward.

Today marks the beginning of a new or renewed journey, for all of us. And that journey begins now.

Amen.