

## The First Sunday in Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13  
Luke 21:25-36

Late in the afternoon people began to gather in the streets of Bethlehem. Some spread blankets in vacant lots, while others sat precariously on walls and fences. Before long, vendors were running low on food. Babies cried occasionally. Fathers hoisted small children up to their shoulders so they could see. Suddenly a hush fell over the crowd. People pointed to the sky. Everyone saw it. A helicopter was slowly approaching the village. Then there was a loud explosion followed by many more, and up in the sky there were bright fireworks of all colors and configurations. The crowd cheered as the pyrotechnical display filled the heavens like a huge canopy over the people. The helicopter hovered over an open space in the town and descended, bearing its precious passenger. The sound system began to pump out loud strains of the "Hallelujah Chorus" as a woman with a country-and-western voice rocked back and forth at the microphone singing the lead part. The lights in a tall skyscraper came on in the shape of a Norwegian pine tree. Finally the helicopter landed, the door opened, and out came the long-awaited messiah, wearing a red and white suit with a shiny black belt and boots and carrying a bag full of gifts for everyone. The savior of the world had arrived in Bethlehem. Everyone cheered.

After a while the fireworks and music died down. The crowd gradually dispersed and went home to get a good night's sleep before returning the next day for a mad frenzy of Christmass shopping. The first annual arrival of the messiah had occurred. And now, having gotten that out of the way, all the people in the land were free to shop till they dropped.

Now isn't that better than the way it really happened two thousand years ago? Let's face it. The way we do Christmass today is infinitely more impressive than the way it actually occurred. Don't you find it a little embarrassing that God didn't have any more pizzazz than to allow his Son to be born of an old man and a teenage girl in the corner of a dark, lonely stable? Aren't you glad there are talented and insightful people in our society today who are able to improve on the story and make it what it should have been all along? Isn't it wonderful that modern technology can be employed so creatively to make Christmass something really *special*? If it weren't for the fireworks and the lighting of the tree, and the helicopter and its jolly, bearded passenger, why, it wouldn't really be Christmass at all, would it?

What happened at the Houston Galleria on Thanksgiving night was a direct assault on the Christian faith. All who saw it witnessed the persecution of the historic church just as surely as any persecution ever occurred in previous centuries. No, there was no massacre of Christians being thrown to the lions or burned at the stake. But there was a massacre of minds and hearts just as severe and demonic. The Gospel of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was massacred by being massaged and perverted into a new Gospel of glorified materialism. Faith was replaced by enthusiasm, grace was turned into vulgar self-indulgence, and love was transformed into the spectacular. The awe and wonder of the Word made flesh was supplanted by the shouts and cheers over Santa Claus arriving with toys and trinkets for everyone.

In today's Gospel there is also a description of the spectacular, but what is described does not evoke joy for most people, but terror. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves," Jesus says. "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Jesus' birth had occurred in a quiet way that attracted little attention. But the day is coming, Jesus says, when global and cosmic occurrences will attract great attention and cause widespread distress. People will predict the end of the world on the basis of these events. They will cower in fear. They will run this way and that to escape. They will faint from terror.

Does this apply to all people? No, it doesn't. It does not apply to people of faith. According to Jesus, people of faith need not panic when they see this happening. "Now when these things begin to take place," he says, "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

On what basis can Jesus say this? Why should we not be afraid, when all the rest of the world is scared to death? The answer is quite simple. The end of the world means judgment, regardless of who you are. When you face the threat of death, the threat of the world as you know it ending, you wonder what will happen to you. Will you survive and be rewarded, or will you be punished? Even people who claim they do not believe in any kind of life after death are haunted by the fear that there just might be. The end of the world means judgment.

Now there are two ways you can deal with judgment. You can do what most people do: postpone it until the end. Or you can do what Christians are advised to do: face it now each day and be forgiven. People who postpone judgment are bound to panic when the end looms near. They realize they face a thorough audit of their entire lives. They fear that they will fail the test and be found unfit.

On the other hand, people who face judgment daily by confessing their sins, repenting, and receiving divine forgiveness, don't have to panic when they face the end. If all your wrongs have been removed by daily confession and absolution, then there won't be anything left to judge on judgment day. You will be "pure and blameless on the day of Christ," as St. Paul says in the first chapter of Philippians. For Christians the final day of judgment is a day of release from further judgment. Therefore, when there are spectacular signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and everyone else around you is overcome by panic, you can stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism starts Christians off on a course of daily repentance and forgiveness. In baptism we are united with Jesus Christ in such a way that we die to sin and are raised to eternal life. From the day of our baptism on throughout our lives, we confess our sins against God and neighbor, and we claim the promise of that forgiveness and reconciliation that God gives us in baptism. Those who have died with Christ face judgment daily and are forgiven. Therefore, they need not fear the end of the world, because the end of the world has already occurred for them at the baptismal font. While the rest of the world is cowering in fear, Christians stand and lift up their heads in the great hope and expectation that the final fulfillment of their redemption is about to be made manifest.

But baptism is not a very spectacular thing, when you get right down to it. It involves standing at the font while some ordinary water is applied to your head and some ancient words are spoken. There is no helicopter hovering overhead like a dove, waiting to descend with brightly wrapped gifts of toys and games. There are no fireworks in the nave, causing the congregation to ooh and aah as volley after volley lights up the rafters. There is no choir singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" through a sound system designed to cause permanent damage to your hearing. There is no Christmas tree outlined in the lighted windows of a skyscraper. There is only the Word of God in and with the water.

You probably don't get any emotional rush when you are baptized. You don't feel more religious than before. You don't behave any differently afterwards. But regardless of how you feel, the fact is that you have been given eternal life through the forgiveness of sins. For the rest of your life you will be able to claim that life and live it. For the rest of your life you will be able to welcome judgment and not dread it. Your final death on earth is not to be feared, for in your baptism you have died the most significant death you will ever die, and the life you have been given in Jesus Christ can never be taken away from you.

Jesus Christ was born in a dark, lonely stable amid lowly animals, not in crowd-filled streets near a shopping mall amid fireworks and thundering music. So also we are born in baptism at a quiet font where the water and the Word flow gently but decisively. And when Christ comes again, we will stand up and raise our heads in great hope and expectation, because our life to come is secure in the life that already came to us when we were baptized.

*Originally preached in 1997*