

**First Sunday of Advent – Year A
(Nov. 28, 2010)**

God's Dream

A few days ago I was driving down Wisconsin Avenue and, as I stopped for a red light, I noticed a bumper sticker on the car in front of me which, believe it or not, said, "Repent! The end is near! Jesus is coming!" It was perhaps left from eleven years ago when we were about to enter a new millennium. Remember some of the panic that was in the air? Talk of computers collapsing; Armageddon and the rapture just around the corner.

Well I certainly have no quarrel with the statement that Jesus is coming, and I definitely am all for repentance, but I think I'll reserve judgment on whether or not the end is near. Here we are, eleven years later, and it hasn't happened yet. After all we heard Jesus say a few weeks ago that even he did not know when the end was coming, and today we hear him say: "You cannot know the day your Lord is coming." So he urges readiness: "You must be prepared. The Son of Man is coming at a time you least expect."

Well, is that supposed to make us fearful? Not at all. Quite the contrary, that Jesus is coming should make us happy. It is simply telling us to be ready.

This Advent season is all about the coming of Jesus. That's what the word "Advent" means. It's about how the Son of God came once as one of us, a little child. The creator of all becomes the most unthreatening creature of all, a helpless baby. But it's about how that same Jesus will come again to gather us all into the peace and joy of God's kingdom. And it's about how he comes to us daily in word and sacrament and in one another. St. Ignatius tells us to be attentive to that daily coming by finding God in all things. Ignatius was convinced that God is always with us, always manifesting God's presence, if only we took the time and made the effort to find him.

And once again, just as two weeks ago, our Scripture readings give us some help in planning how we get ready for the coming of Jesus, whenever he comes, wherever he comes, however he comes.

First of all: Isaiah. It's one of those wonderful Messianic oracles where Isaiah tells us what God's dream is for this world we live in. God dreams of peace, Isaiah tells us. God dreams of all nations streaming together to the mountain of the Lord's house where all will live in peace and harmony. "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." Instruments of death and destruction will become farming tools to grow the food that gives us life. "One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again." Not only will there be no more war, there will not even be training for war. That's what God wants. That's what God dreams of.

Isaiah's vision of universal peace and harmony might seem hopelessly unrealistic to us at this time when we are so absorbed by the violence of our world: unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, threats from Iran and North Korea, suicide bombings in Israel, periodic warnings of terrorist attacks in these United States. But Isaiah's message was proclaimed in a no less difficult time when the nation was threatened with destruction. What the prophet knew, and what God knew as God inspired the prophet, was that people who live in desperate times need better stories to live by than what they are experiencing. They need the promise of a better future. They need hope.

And that's what Advent is about. It reminds us that we are people who can hope against hope. It reminds us that God is faithful to God's promises. Another prophet, Jeremiah, also writing at a difficult time, spoke to the people with the voice of God: "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made." (Jer. 33:14)

The difficulty is that so much depends on us. Isaiah tells us that God dreams of peace. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers. They shall be called children of God."

Well, you know, when we think of making peace, we should not think simply in terms of Afghanistan and Iraq. We should not think simply in terms of Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, or of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. We should think of our own nation and the enmities that exist here on our very soil. We should think of our cities where violence stalks the streets. After a highly contentious political campaign we should think of the issues that divide the American people.

We should think of ourselves and our divided hearts where, like Paul, we know we want to do good, but so often find ourselves doing what we do not want to do. We should think of our own parish and what issues might yet divide us. There will not be peace in our world, in our nation, in our city, God's dream will not come true, until there is first peace in all our hearts. As the hymn has it, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." Peace, as we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace.

So the question I must ask myself as I prepare this Advent for the coming of the Lord – and not just some distant coming at the end of time – but his coming today – the question I must ask myself is, "Am I at peace?" Or is there some issue in my life that needs to be resolved? Some dependency that makes it hard for me to give myself to the Lord? Some reconciliation that needs to be faced before I can be at peace? Am I content with the divisions that exist in our nation, or am I simply complacent before what seems too big a problem for me to face? Or is there something I can do to move myself and others just a little way toward peace, love, forgiveness.

Reconciliation presupposes forgiveness, forgiving those who may have offended me, and asking forgiveness of those whom I may have offended. Jesus gave us the great example from the cross when he said, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." And last Sunday we heard him forgive the repentant thief when he told him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." "Forgive us our trespasses," we pray, "as we forgive those who trespass against us." Have we become so used to those words through daily repetition that they have ceased to have meaning? If those words could become more real to us, if we could live that way, then there would be peace in our hearts, peace in our city, peace in our nation. God's dream would be a little closer to coming true.

And then, too, we would be ready for the Lord, whenever he comes, wherever he comes, however he comes.