

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**November 27, 2016; The First Sunday of Advent**

**Readings:** Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44.

## **Keep Awake**

Today we begin the season of Advent.

This is the start of the new Church year.

We begin again, as we start to prepare spiritually for the  
holy day of Christmas.

Many would have you focused on the holiday of Christmas  
because business depends on it.

And there is nothing wrong with preparing in all the usual  
ways.

However, the Church gives us permission, in fact  
encourages us, invites us, into the season of  
Advent...

these four weeks are a time to find some space and time  
from the daily demands of life, and consider what the  
coming of Jesus into the world means  
for you this year...yes, every year...Christ is born to us...but  
each year we are different.

Our lives have changed in some way.

So I see Advent as a time to find some quiet or a nurturing  
space for my soul...to wait, to watch, to prepare.

Our Wednesday night Contemplative services might be  
just the thing for you, in the midst of the busy weeks,  
to come here at 6:30pm and let the peace, the  
music, the prayers welcome you home to  
yourself and God.

What is it that you do to stay awake to God in your life?  
What helps you keep alert to the ways of the Spirit and the  
love God has for you?

Advent is a lovely gentle time, but it is also a season that  
wants to shake us awake.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew gets our attention.

I always wonder, during these first Sundays of Advent,  
what a newcomer to Christianity might make of this,  
having come to Church expecting a focus on  
Christmas.

Instead, one hears, about the end of time...the 2nd Coming  
of Christ--- “two will be in the field, one will be taken,  
and one will be left...keep awake therefore, for you  
do not know on what day your Lord is  
coming.”

Not exactly the image or message you want on a Christmas card.

But hearing this, we start to realize or remember that Advent is about both  
the beginning and the ending.

Advent is about the birth of Jesus, the first Advent--advent  
meaning coming or arrival -- Advent also invites us to  
consider the Second Coming of Christ.

As Episcopalians, this is not something we think about a  
lot.

In fact, we can be a bit embarrassed or distance ourselves  
from those who might want to talk about the end of  
time and Jesus Coming Again.

But if we are real about, every Sunday, we speak of it.

“Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.”

...as we will say to day during Eucharistic Prayer A.

And this part of the faith is found in our creeds...central to

our statements of faith.

But we don't want to be like those who have taken this reading and created the idea of the rapture; the rapture is not part of our faith, idea came about in the 19th century.

The idea of the rapture has since stimulated interest...the *Left Behind* books,

and most recently, the TV series, *Leftovers*.

In *Leftovers*, an Episcopal priest goes around handing out sheets with info about those who have departed...that there were not very good...to try

and disprove the idea that the disappearance of 2% of the world

population was the rapture.

Also, there is that website, run by self-proclaimed atheists, who for a reasonable price, will take care of your pets should you be taking up unexpectedly.

That is absolutely my most favorite way of dealing with this idea of the rapture.

The fact is, we don't know what will happen.

History is God's story and it is going somewhere.

Sometimes it seems that we go around in circles, but we are part of God's creation, and it part of our faith that, in the end, God will prevail---

as we hear from the prophet Isaiah --

"In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall raise above the hill; all nations shall stream to it."

When we think about our world, we might wonder, when will God help us out and bring justice, transform

weapons into tools, bring an end to war?

The first Christians thought that time was coming soon,  
and so they wrote about the end of time and the need  
to be prepared.

But as the scripture itself tells us, “But about that day and  
hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor  
the Son, but only the Father.”

Perhaps Christ will have come again when all people are  
acting as Christ to each other?

We pray, we act, we seek to be about the ways of  
God now, as much as we can.

That makes us Advent people in a sense.

I love the Prayers of the People we will use today, provided  
by the Episcopal Peace Fellowship in 2006.

In each prayer, we will ask God to help us cast away the  
works of darkness and put on the armor of light, and  
this light is peace, justice, passion, love, joy, the  
Spirit.

We do not need to worry about the Second Coming of  
Christ; we don't really have time for that, because we  
are about the meaning of such an Advent now.

Right now, we are preparing to host CARITAS during the  
fourth week of Advent.

We will provide shelter, food, and friendship to 40 or so  
women who are working but still need some help as  
they seek to have the resources to have their own  
home.

You can be part of our Advent of Christ by supporting these  
women by signing up to help with an aspect of the

week.

Or just stopping by in the evening to say hello.

Christ comes into our world still in many ways.

We can't know how all of this is going to end up.

We can know that Christ will come again for each of us...I

believe that...that at the end of our lives we will see  
Jesus and all will be well.

Our society does not prepare us well for the end of our

lives, or even the later years of our lives, because our

society is one that likes youth and health,  
and success, defined in limiting ways.

But as the prayer we used for lighting our wreath said, "Keep us mindful  
that at any moment you may ask of us an accounting of our lives."

Maybe we didn't like praying that today.

But being mindful of the promises of God, actually helps us.

I hear this prayer as a positive thing...God cares, God

loves, God wants to hear about our lives...since

God is love...I imagine that talking with God

about our lives would involve a lot of

joy...joy in the lives we had, and in God's

forgiveness for those times we were not reflecting

God's light to others or to our world.

The focus for our First Sunday of Advent is to be awake,

stay alert to the ways of God...to God...and to that

which we anticipate...both the beginning of the

story as we move toward Christmas...and the

end of the story, when Christ will come

again.

The people in our Gospel reading were not doing anything wrong...they were living their lives...in the field...grinding flour...sleeping at night in their homes...all good and proper.

Eating, drinking, getting married...

As wonderful as these life experiences are,  
our lives can be more than even those things.

We can live our lives with all of our daily routines, activities, work, responsibilities, fun...and we can be awake to promises of God.

We can be alert and watchful for those moments when God is breaking in...to our world...to our hearts...calling us to places of trust and hope.

I will conclude with this pray, which we will hear again, during the Prayers of the People:

O God of hope, before we turn to you, you run to us, before we call out to you, you answer; by the might of your Spirit lift us from the numbing uncertainties of life to joyful expectation of Christ's appearing that, when he comes again, he may meet us as people who anticipate his reign with eagerness and who welcome him with praise. *Amen.*