



## First Sunday in Advent

27 November 2005

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

We're only what—two miles or so from Cherry Creek Mall? Two miles and a whole universe apart. This place couldn't differ more in this season from that place, that virtual shrine of American consumerist culture. I haven't checked the mall out yet—I can only imagine. I hear this year's theme has something to do with C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*—an allegorical work that retells the Christ story . . . and you can bet C.S. Lewis is rapidly spinning in his grave as his counter-cultural tale of redemption is turned into a catalyst for the selling of our souls to the credit card companies and those who earn interest rather than pay it. I do know that at Cherry Creek and across the malls of America the trees are trimmed, the stockings are stuffed, and the carols are being played—all to manage us into the right mood for our frantic, seasonal acquisition of stuff, stuff, and stuff—none of which we really need. And the pundits are already speculating—will this be a good Christmas or not? A good Christmas being one in which people buy with giddy abandon, tossing care to the wind, in the hope that some perfect gift will bring perfect happiness as the perfect family blisses out in the perfectly decorated home.

And then there's this place. Looks pretty spare doesn't it? Withered grape vines, dried heads of wheat adorning an old, discarded, iron-rimmed wagon wheel. What color there is seems all wrong. Where's the green, the red, the gold, the tinsel, the ornaments, the colored lights? All we've got is some weird blue stuff—obviously from different palates and dye lots. And we've got some bare willow trees with only a couple of lights on each. And no Christmas carols. Just some fusty, odd-sounding Advent hymns. This place couldn't be more counter-cultural. Indeed! That is what it is—and that's who we are—counter-cultural.

In the Church, the days leading up to Christmas are a time of twice waiting, a time of double preparation. First and most obvious, we are preparing ourselves for the yearly celebration beginning in the night of December 24—and not before—of the great mystery of the incarnation, the great mystery of the God who wills to be born out of wedlock to a peasant woman, in poverty, in a barn attended by animals and some disreputable shepherds. In this season we in the church wait patiently, meditatively, quietly, simply for the season celebration of that quiet big-bang of a midnight birth whose meaning is light years upon light years away from what the retail world has made it—our celebration made more odd but perhaps more enduring and joyous for having patiently waited for the feast to begin. In the land and culture of immediate gratification what could be more counter-cultural than quietly waiting??

Second and perhaps less obvious, we are waiting and preparing ourselves for that mysterious event that we call the Day of Christ, the Day of the Earth's Redemption, that we call the Second Coming, the Day of the Lord, Judgement Day. We remember in these days of Advent how Christ, speaking within the limits of human language, promised he would come again and bring all things to their completion. We do this waiting in a counter-cultural fashion as well.

Much of what passes for Christianity, much of what has always passed for Christianity has looked toward the Day of the Lord, Judgment Day, the Second Coming, whatever you want to call it, as something to be

dreaded, something to be feared. And in some ways there is truth there—were things as they seemed to be before the first coming of Christ, that day would indeed be one to fear, a day when fire causes the seas of the earth to boil, a day when every mountain quakes at God’s presence. Were God being fair, were God playing by the rule of law, were God playing by our religious rules it would indeed be a day when we all would all be . . . toast. But God in the First Advent of Christ proclaimed God’s self not to be into the religious rules game, not to be into fairness and an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, smite-the-wrong-doers-dead-and-damn-‘em-all-to hell sort of dealing. In the First Advent of God into the world in Christ, God declared God’s self gone out of the judgment business. In the mystery of Christ’s birth, life, crucifixion, death, and resurrection God declared God’s self to be gone out of the business of religion and into the business of unending, bounteous, universal, scandalous, brash, and shocking . . . mercy. Mercy and love for you, for each and every one of you – without your having to do anything – and I do mean anything. It’s absolutely free—and there, for you, each and every new morning, noon, and night no matter how badly you screwed up the morning, noon, or night before. And it’s forever. Sorry, but you can’t out-sin God’s mercy—that would make us more powerful than God—and we’re just not that good at sin.

So—what’s with this Day of the Lord? What’s with this Judgement Day? What’s with this Second Coming, this Second Advent? And how do we prepare for it? Forget all that you might read, watch, or hear from the fevered and fear-filled imagination of Tim LeHay and those who peddle the Left Behind series of books about the end times. I am deadly serious here: that crap is nothing but a dusted-off, technicolor, lots-of-special-effects version of some sees-you-when-you’re-sleeping, knows-when-you’re-awake, knows-if-you’ve-been-bad-or-good, so-you-better-watch-out, Santa-Clause-is-coming-to-town sort of god. Forget all that garbage. We, the baptized people of God, will await and prepare for what is to come by being who we already are—a people reborn in the image of Christ with nothing whatsoever to fear.

That is why Blessed Dorothy Day, confident (with faith) that in Christ she was already holy and blameless before God, was free to care for others, why Jake is free to serve others by designing dependable office furniture, why Joanne is free to serve others by working on electrical power lines when there is a foot of snow on the ground and the wind chill factor is minus thirty-six, why Chuck can teach a group of Scouts about different kinds of trees and about squirrels and chipmunks, why Wendy can help build an observatory and telescope for awe-struck astronomers, why John can play cello in the high school orchestra, and why Chris can sit with her brother Tommie and watch the new Harry Potter movie.

All of them, all of you, already holy and blameless before God. It’s why all of you are freed from having to measure your worth according to the standards of the culture, by what you own, or wear, how big your homes are, how gorgeous the ribbons, how bright the lights, how many the packages. It’s why you are free to be down-to-earth creatures who care for the creation, who love and serve the neighbor, and who enjoy the good creation. All of you, already holy and blameless before God. It’s why you are free to wait and watch, quietly, meditatively, confidently both for the yearly celebration of Christ’s first birth and for the mysterious, unknowable Day of Christ’s Second Coming with nothing to hide and nothing to fear. You have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever and against that not even the gates of hell, not even the insanities of the season, shall ever prevail.