



## The First Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 2:1–5

Romans 13:11–14

Matthew 24:36–44

December 2, 2001

In days to come . . . they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

These words have an intensely different meaning today than they did a mere twelve weeks ago – at least for us in this country where our privilege has kept us insulated and isolated from the incessant wars that are the lot of far too many. How quickly everything changes. And on this first day of Advent, I find myself already wondering: will there be a Christmas truce, somewhere, anywhere on this sad planet? For one day will the weapons of war be laid down to honor the birth of the One whom we call the Christ, the Savior of the Nations, the One whom Muslims too revere as one of the five great prophets of Allah?

I vaguely remember, somewhere back in my brain, of hearing about Christmas truces made during the Vietnam War. I don't remember if those truces held or not – but I do remember, hoping and praying back then in those dark, northern Minnesota days and nights of Advent that for one night and day on the other side of the world the napalm wouldn't burn, the bombs wouldn't burst, the rifles wouldn't crack and there would be a silent night, a holy night.

A few weeks ago I was talking to an elderly friend. "I think it is time for me to leave this old world," she said. "I grew up in the first war; then there was the second war, then Korea, then Vietnam, then that Gulf War, and now this. I've seen too much. And I had thought this new century might be different from the one I spent my life in." And she shook her head in sorrow and silent tears found their way through the furrows of her aged skin.

When I was a professor at Regis University, no matter what course I was teaching, I found a reason – more often than not a far-fetched reason – to show the film "A Midnight Clear." I can't say it's my favorite film, but it is a film that tells the old, old story. "A Midnight Clear" is set during December 1944. A small US Army intelligence platoon, comprised almost totally of teenagers, is sent on a pointless, dangerous reconnaissance expedition to a farmhouse within a few kilometres of the German front. All of them are deeply afraid and sure that they are doomed. A few days pass and they discover a small band of German soldiers, children and old men. The American soldiers retreat to the abandoned farmhouse they have occupied. They increase their guard. And then on a midnight clear, the midnight of Christmas, one of the guards hears something. Voices – singing – "O Tannenbaum" comes across a clearing from in the woods. The US soldiers make their way to the trenches they've dug in the snow. And then one foolhardy or faith-filled one (there is often no difference) begins singing "Adeste, fideles, laeti triumphantes, venite, venite, in Bethlehem." And German voices and American voices finish the ancient song. Guns are laid down and for two groups of soldiers the war ceases as wine and bread, beans and cheese are shared. But Christmas ends, as Christmases on this shadowed planet always do; the winds of war change directions and their separate peace is shattered. In spite of the carnage that follows, the film is not without hope. In order to make their way out from behind German lines, the surviving soldiers lovingly, tenderly bathe their dead comrade. And they drain the blood from the still form of a young man who had hoped one day to be a priest, and with his blood they paint a large cross on white canvas – the peaceful sign of the Red Cross, their only hope of safe passage, and they drape it across the top of their jeep as they make their way to safety.

Today we stand at the beginning of yet another Church year, of yet another Advent. Advent, the season when we prepare ourselves to hear again the story of Christ's birth two-thousand-and-one plus years ago in a town this year nearly vacant because yet another generation has learned too little else than hatred and war. But if this Advent is only a preparation for celebrating something that happened those many, many years ago in Bethlehem, we of all people are most to be pitied.

Though Advent is surely a time to prepare to celebrate Christmas, 2001, Advent is a time not only to look forward in hope, but to live in a present hope now – to live now in an absurd and foolhardy hope of a day when all history will come to its end, when the wicked insanities of this world's ways are ended. The blue of our Advent paraments and priestly vestments

are a sign of that hope. The blue signifies the color of the sky right before the sun breaks over the horizon. This magnificent blue proclaims that the night is nearly over, the darkness nearly ended and that soon, very soon the dawn from on high shall break upon us. That day, however, might very well not be in the lifetime of any of us here. About that day and hour no one knows, only God.

Now – God is eternal. And “eternal” means outside the boundaries of time. When we say that God is eternal, we are saying that God exists beyond all time. In God, the future already is. The end of history has already come. In God, all things have been accomplished. And now I tell you a mystery: in Matthew’s gospel this morning we hear that just as in the story of Noah, the flood swept some suddenly away, for you, the baptized of God, in the floodwaters of Holy Baptism, you have already been taken, and the feast that knows no end is here even this day.

For you, the baptized of God, the end of all history has already broken in, it is written, and it is finished. And though it is yet dark on this shore, for you the light has already dawned. As children of light, you now walk in the light. Here, now live in that light that shines in the darkness, and know now, not any darkness of the past not any darkness of the present, nor any future darkness can comprehend or overcome that light. And together, as we await that day when there shall be no more darkness, let us live our hope exuberantly, abundantly; let us without fear show forth our hope in every word and in every deed because that day is already dawning when they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; that day is already dawning when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, when neither shall they learn war any more!

Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come.