

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WEST TEXAS

Advent 2017

Week One – beginning Sunday, December 3

Introduction to the week

Readings for Sunday, December 3:

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

It is customary during Advent to have an Advent wreath in your home and to light one candle for each week of Advent: one candle every day during week one; two candles each day during week two, etc. This study provides brief prayers at the beginning of each day for the candle lighting.

Prayers for candle-lighting

Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;

show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved. [*Light the candle*]

You meet those who gladly do right,

those who remember you in your ways.

Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;

show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Commentary on the Scripture Readings

The readings for Advent immerse us in the longings of Israel:

- both poignant longing for a remembered past when the Israelites were a united nation under the rule and guidance of their God,
- and a courageous longing for a future that God is preparing the people to receive

We live in the midst of a community of faith with very deep roots and long memories.

As the inheritors of these generations of the faithful, we have the advantage of wisdom

deeper than one generation.

Today's readings take us into two distinct time periods:

- the time when the exiled citizens of Judea were returning to their homeland after upwards of fifty years in Babylon (in the reading from Isaiah, around 538 BCE),
- and the first century CE, when Jesus of Nazareth was carrying out his ministry in the late twenties in Roman Imperial Palestine (witnessed in the reading from the Gospel of Mark), and Paul was spreading the Gospel across the Empire in the fifties (evidenced by the opening lines of his letter to the church in Corinth, Greece).
- Both Jesus and Paul proclaim the reign of God in the midst of the oppressive rule of Rome: a proclamation of faith in God's *power to create* in the face of Rome's *power to destroy*.

While the readings may be separated by centuries, they all witness to the intense longing of the people of God for God to enter in a definitive way to establish justice and righteousness. For the Church, Advent marks a season of preparation for God's entry.

- Because God is pure holiness, we seek to prepare ourselves by disciplines of holiness.
- Because God is pure justice and mercy, we prepare ourselves by caring for our fellow human beings with concern for justice on the large scale and works of mercy on the personal scale.
- Because God is pure love, we prepare ourselves by opening and widening our hearts to God and our neighbor.

One of the most difficult readings this week is the passage from Mark 13, which is sometimes called the “Little Apocalypse.”

- Part of what makes it so difficult is that it depends on our recognizing references to several other Jewish writings that were familiar to Jesus’ audience, from prophets like Isaiah and Daniel to other writings with which most of us are not familiar, such as the Similitudes of Enoch.
- In the centuries around the time of Jesus, there was a great deal of interest in the powers that were understood to exist between the completely invisible God and our material world.
- For example, the Son of Man was understood to be a heavenly figure to whom God would entrust the judgment of the nations before God’s full entry into the world. You can probably imagine how much an oppressed people yearned for God’s judgment upon their oppressors. Early followers of Jesus understood him, as risen Lord, to be this Son of Man, who would return to bring about the full consequences of God’s justice, so that God’s reign could be fulfilled upon the earth.
- Likewise, there was a great deal of interest in angels in Jesus’ day, and we see angels mentioned in the passage, assisting the Son of Man.

What is not at all difficult to understand (though challenging) in Mark 13 is the repeated call to “be alert” and “keep awake,” because the reign of God may come at any time. Paul’s words to the assembly of the faithful in Corinth give us insight into their lively sense of the Spirit’s gracious and powerful outpouring upon them, as they experienced the risen Christ’s presence with them and awaited the full reign of God.

For Reflection

The four weeks of Advent give Christians a chance to prepare to welcome the fullness of Incarnation at Christmas, not only the Incarnation of God in the infant Jesus in the first century, but perhaps even more significantly, the ongoing incarnation of God in the people and events of our own lives now.

People choose different ways to prepare for God's nearness.

- Some choose to adopt practices of quiet reflection and simplicity, in order not to get caught up in the commercial frenzy of our surrounding culture.
- Others choose to engage in creative endeavors, to experience God's incarnational joy.
- Others choose to deepen their practice of traditional disciplines of prayer or study of the scriptures or charity.
- Many Christians engage practices of generosity during Advent, as a corollary to God's generous self-giving in Christ.

This study offers some questions for reflection each day, to bring the scriptures into your life. Knowing what kind of preparation you are drawn to may help you use those questions in a way most appropriate to how God is calling you right now.