

"Yearning"
Pentecost XXIV
Proper 27
12 November 2023
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16 or Amos 5:18-24

Psalm 70

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Saint Matthew 25:1-13

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Advent's Shadow

If we carefully look at the readings at this end of the Church's Year, we will be able to detect a shadow of a much longer Advent. In fifth century Gaul, a season modeled on Lent began to emerge, a season that prepared for the Nativity of our Lord. This model was also known in northwest Italy, and later in Spain as well. The readings during this period emerged from *Reginensis 9*, a listing of readings that dates from the seventh century, probably from Milan, and the Ambrosian liturgy. With the emergence of a centralized Roman rite, these localized celebrations were reduced to four Sundays. It's not too early then to launch into the Advent themes of the end of time and the beginning of the new. The increasing darkness of the season, and the moodier themes of the readings are ripe materials for the preacher.

The Darkness begins:

This is the second woe in a series of three woes in the fifth chapter of Amos. The first woe, verses 7-17, addresses those who "turn justice into wormwood". The third woe, Chapter 6, addresses the complacent. Our reading, the second woe, addresses those "who yearn for the Day of the Lord." This may be the first time that the Day of the Lord is addressed in the scriptures. It was a hope of the people that God would intervene in their history and redeem them. Amos says warily, 'Be careful about that which you desire.' The reading is filled with opposites, "darkness, not light, gloom without any brightness." Amos wants to startle his readers with the reality of God's presence. Having brought sacrifices and offerings to God, they expected God's favor and delight. Amos wants his readers to look deeply into their own hearts, and the motives that moved them to make an offering. "I hate, I despise your feasts." Amos wants us to see who and what we really are, and how we offer and serve in society. It is not the offering that God despises, but rather the true heart of those who offer and sing. There is an alternative that is offered, and it is one that we need to truly heed in these days, in our time. "Rather, let justice surge like waters, and righteousness like an unfailing stream." Here is what needs to be offered not only to God, but to our neighbor and our community as well.

Expectations:

The Second Reading from the First Letter to the Thessalonians is an appropriate reading following All Souls' Day (2 November). It is also a good example of readings representing the Advent Shadow. It is rife with Paul's eschatology, and the hopes engendered by Jewish apocalyptic. This is met by the Thessalonians' real question as to what will happen to those who have died before the coming of Jesus again. Paul does not speak of death directly but rather assigns it a gentler term, "those who have fallen asleep", although some English translations use the phrase, "have died." His concern is one of consolation, and of promise as well. The expectation that he shares with them is of a coming-again Christ, and the reunion of souls with Christ. The closing passage is quite pastoral, "Therefore, console one another with these words." Paul connects the death and resurrection of Jesus with what is promised those who follow Jesus – that God will raise them too. Thus begins the Advent hopes that are sure to follow in a couple of Sundays.

On Being Prepared:

With this reading we have one of several "Parables of the Kingdom", namely, "The Faithful Slave" (24:45-51), "The Man Going on a Journey" (25:14-30) next Sunday's Gospel, and our reading today, "The Ten Virgins" (25:1-13). These are preceded by "The Coming of the Son of Man" (24:29-44), and followed by "The Judgment" the Gospel for Christ the King (25:31-46). It might be good to read all of these pericopes in order to explore the full context of Matthew's eschatology, his vision of what is to come at the Eschaton – the end time.

Matthew's focus is concentrated on the Bridegroom, so much so that it appears that he (or scribes transcribing his text) eliminated some words at the end of verse 1, "*Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom,*" 'and the bride'! Several manuscripts have that as the ending to that sentence, and it follows, in that the attendants were assigned to the Bride, not the groom. That was the custom at the time of Jesus, and the times before. That is what the reader would expect. And who is the bride? None other than Israel. Jesus' message here is that God is coming to claim God's own, God's chosen. We know Israel to be the bride, especially in Hosea, and similarly in Revelation we understand the bride to be the Messianic Community. The attendants, however, the ones who are to be watchful, awaiting the Bridegroom's appearance, are of a concern. There are those who have been faithless, and those who have been vigilant. That is a picture of the community in which Matthew writes. There is no comparable scene in the Gospel of Luke, but you might want to look at Luke 12:32-5ff. Keeping watch is the order of the day both then and now.

Commercial television is full of preparation language, but it is preparation for what is secondary, not what is primary to the Christian's mind. In a way, N.'s parents are preparing themselves and their child to meet the Coming One. And our Advent hopes, already begun in these readings will continue until we celebrate the feast – and beyond. The question we need to ponder is: How shall we prepare? How shall we be well provisioned, not for the Christmas Feast, but for eternity?

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