

## 2 Advent, Year B

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Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

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As I said last week,  
you and I have entered  
the holy season of Advent:  
those few sacred weeks that lead us up  
to the joy of Christmas day.

And in our tradition—  
a tradition that has endured for centuries—  
we use this time to talk not so much about  
the coming of the Baby Jesus  
(which already happened two-thousand-plus years ago),  
but about the *other* coming ...  
the *future* coming ...  
the *second* coming ...  
of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And listen. I know.  
I know that's weird.

It's weird because, number one,  
no one else is doing this right now.  
Most other people you know  
have already decked their halls,  
are already singing their carols,  
and are already drinking their 'nog.

Most people are not sitting around,  
waiting for the coming of Christ.

If anything, they're waiting  
for the coming of a large, bearded man  
carrying a sack full of gifts  
and a probable case of diabetes.

But I know it's also weird for us  
to be so focused on the Second Coming  
because—let's face it—  
it's probably not the kind of thing  
you expect in the Episcopal Church.

To be clear, there are *many* Christians  
who *are* looking for the return of Christ  
even at this very moment.  
And in their minds,  
that day is imminent, violent,  
predictable, and necessary.  
News like we saw this week  
pertaining to Jerusalem  
only stokes those fires. <sup>1</sup>

But by and large, we Episcopalians  
are well afflicted with logic and reason.  
We are not the types to dote over  
apocalyptic fan fiction  
like the *Left Behind* series.  
As a people,  
we are mostly allergic  
to sensationalism,  
and worry,  
and vengeance,  
and fear.

And yet,  
all throughout our Bible  
and all throughout our prayers,  
you and I repeatedly make  
the full-throated proclamation that  
Christ has died,  
Christ is risen,  
and—oh, what's that?—  
*Christ will come again.*

We say this is good news,  
and we stake our very lives on it.

So *if* we are the kind of Christians  
who truly believe this stuff—  
and we most definitely are—  
but we're *not* the kind of Christians  
who are literalists, extremists, or zealots,  
what, then, *do* we say about the Second Coming?

What do we believe about the future of humanity?  
What do we believe God is up to in our world?  
And, most importantly, why are we not afraid?

I'm so glad you asked.

To help us get there,  
here are three promises,  
lifted from today's readings:  
promises of a God who's coming for us,  
not for the sake of destroying us,  
but for the sake of restoring us,  
completing us,  
and bringing us home.

\* \* \*

**Promise number one:  
God is determined to get to you.**

From Isaiah:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low . . .  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”<sup>ii</sup>

If you've ever been in charge  
of protecting a child—  
particularly your own—  
then you well know what it's like  
to survey the surroundings  
and to be vigilantly aware  
of anyone or anything that stands  
between you and your child.

When my family and I were recently in New York,  
we went to Central Park with a friend.  
It was a lovely, busy day with people all around.  
And in Central Park there are these gigantic rocks—  
some as big as a house—  
on and around which people like to congregate and play.

Our friend said,  
“Let your children climb over that big one,  
and we adults can walk around  
and meet them on the other side.  
You're not helicopter parents; it'll be fine!”

We looked around and said,

“Oh ... yeah ... helicopter ... fine.”  
And we let them do it.

But you better believe  
that even when I could not see them,  
I was keenly aware of where my children were.  
And if anyone or anything  
on that giant rock or in that busy park  
had tried to touch, or move, or harm my children,  
I . . . would . . . have . . . *destroyed* that rock.  
I would have raised the valleys  
and leveled the mountains.  
*I would have made a way to my children,  
and nothing would have stopped me.*

That, my friends,  
is what the Lord your God  
has done, would do, and will do  
for you.

When Isaiah says,  
“Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low,”  
he’s saying a lot of things,  
but first and foremost, he is saying that  
*God is determined to get to us.*

No mountain—not even the mountain  
of our own worries, doubts, sins, or fears—  
will be enough to keep him away.  
God will move heaven and earth—  
*has* moved heaven and earth—  
to get to you, his beloved child.

**Promise number two:**  
**God is up to stuff, even when you don’t think he is.**

From 2 Peter:  
“With the Lord one day is like a thousand years,  
and a thousand years are like one day.  
The Lord is not slow about his promise.”<sup>iii</sup>

Throughout my life, I have noticed  
that there are at least two kinds of people.  
There are those who,  
when confronted with a challenge, declare,

“We must act aggressively and decisively *RIGHT NOW!*”  
You might call these the “fire, ready, aim” people.

And then there are those who say,  
“Wait. Wait. Patience.  
Let’s see what happens.  
Let’s see what unfolds.”

This is the difference between  
the doctor who blasts the patient  
with every treatment under the sun  
on the very first visit,  
versus the doctor who says,  
“Let’s take our time and see what this really is.  
Let’s give the body room to do its own healing, too.”

It seems to me that, on the whole,  
our God is much more like the second:  
watching and waiting with great patience  
while the medicine of his grace  
has a chance to do its work.

Now, make no mistake:  
Peter is clear that the Day is coming  
when all we rely on that *isn’t* God  
will be dissolved away.  
But even that will be an act of healing.

Meanwhile, just because he’s not  
poking and prodding us,  
blitzing and blasting us,  
does not mean the Doctor is not in.  
Healing is underway,  
and we do well to  
“regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”<sup>iv</sup>

In other words,  
our God is up to stuff,  
even when you don’t think he is.

**Lastly, promise number three:  
Repentance is the key  
that opens our hearts and eyes to God.**

From Mark’s Gospel:  
“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,

proclaiming a baptism of repentance  
for the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>v</sup>

Years ago I got caught behind an eighteen-wheeler  
driving down a small, dark, south Georgia road.  
Emblazoned on the back of that truck  
were these prophetic words:  
“You better get right with God,  
or you’re gonna get left.”

There’s some theological truth to this,  
but maybe not the truth many would assume.

For many people, repentance means that  
it’s somehow all up to us  
to “get right” with God . . .  
to make ourselves “good enough” for God.

But have you ever tried  
to make yourself  
good enough for God?  
Good luck.

It is an impossible task.  
(Besides, that’s not how the  
“justification of the ungodly”<sup>vi</sup>  
works anyway.  
Hint: it’s a gift you receive,  
not a burden you bear.)

John the Baptist came on the scene  
declaring that we need repentance,  
*and he was right.*

But if your idea of repentance  
means making yourself “good enough” for God,  
you’ve missed the point entirely.

Repentance is not self-improvement.  
Repentance is not pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.  
Repentance is not getting yourself right so you won’t get left.

No, repentance is the realization  
that you need help . . .  
that you’re no good at doing all this on your own . . .  
that none of us will ever be good enough . . .  
but that *God has chosen to love you anyway.*

As for the Second Coming,  
we ... will ... not ... be able to see God—  
we ... will ... miss ... the coming of Christ—  
if we're too busy trying to manage our own lives,  
trying to hide and wrangle our own sins,  
trying to build up our own realities, and securities, and safety-nets,  
and trying to do absolutely everything all on our own.  
In the end, all of that is a sham and a distraction.

We need repentance  
because it is the key  
that opens our hearts and eyes to God.

\* \* \*

And so, here we are.  
A bunch of Episcopalians on a cold December morning,  
waiting for the coming of Christ . . .  
and what we don't know about that great Day  
could fill a warehouse.

Unlike other Christians,  
we don't presume to know the day or the hour;  
we don't pretend to know how it will unfold;  
we don't profess to know the details.  
Neither did Jesus.<sup>vii</sup>

But what we *do* know is this:

We know that our God is determined to get to us,  
and he'll stop at nothing to restore all things  
and bring us home to his love in the end.

We know that our God is up to stuff,  
even in these strange and difficult days  
when he seems so far away  
and it feels like we're doing all in our power  
to work against him.

And we know that in the end  
the thing that will determine our worth before his throne—  
the thing that will make us “right with God”—  
will not have been our own perfection,  
but his own free and unconditional love for us.

That is why, brothers and sisters,  
we await the day of his coming,  
and we do so without shame or fear.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus.  
We are ready.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Bass, Diana Butler. "For many evangelicals, Jerusalem is about prophecy, not politics." 8 Dec. 2017.  
<[www.cnn.com/2017/12/08/opinions/jerusalem-israel-evangelicals-end-times-butler-bass-opinion/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/08/opinions/jerusalem-israel-evangelicals-end-times-butler-bass-opinion/index.html)>  
Accessed 9 Dec. 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Isaiah 40:3-5a

<sup>iii</sup> 2 Peter 3:8b-9a

<sup>iv</sup> 2 Peter 3:15a

<sup>v</sup> Mark 1:4

<sup>vi</sup> Romans 4:5

<sup>vii</sup> Mark 13:32