

Once again, we begin the season of Advent today. And this shift means that today is something like the church equivalent of New Year's Day--in that the First Sunday of Advent is always the beginning of our worship year. So, we begin our church year, every year, with four purple Sundays that gradually restore to us a remembrance of the biblical story that leads us to Christmas. | In Advent we await the birth of Jesus—not as if he hasn't already been born, of course—but our growing anticipation for the holiday is intended to build our remembrance of *what has already happened*. But also, in a way that can be hard to describe, there can also be more than a *past tense* sense of Christmas. As Christmas approaches, we can experience moments when the past also enters the *present*. This experience of “remembering” Christmas can be like what we experience as we grow older, when *remembering treasured times and people past can also seem immediately present to us*, blurring our sense of time.

So there is something about Advent, and our own personal experience of time, that strangely involves a kind of “spiritual time travel”. And specifically for Advent, the time travel is not only about going *back* to the *first* Christmas, but also finding that past becoming *present*. And then, strangely enough, there is something about Christmas that also urges us *forward into the future*...when...what shall we call it...there will be a *last* Christmas. The Bible and the Creeds talk about this future view in various ways: the *Second Coming* of Christ...the *Day* of our Lord Jesus Christ...the *Son of Man coming in clouds*...Christ coming again *in glory to judge the living and the dead*... So that's what I want to begin to talk about today. We will yet have plenty of time in Advent and Christmas to look *back to the first Christmas*. So let's spend some time, time-traveling *forward to the last Christmas*.

One of the striking changes I have experienced in ministry, going from being a United Methodist pastor to being an Episcopal priest, is that there were *quite a few* Methodists within my churches who were very focused on the Second Coming of Christ. And, in comparison, I very *rarely* have encountered Episcopalians who speak of the Second Coming of Christ--apart from our reciting the Creed. Honestly, that is both a *relief*--and a *challenge*. I am relieved that Episcopalians generally are not captive to the kind of End Times schedules and predictions that have become a late modern innovation of a lot of American Protestantism. But then there seems to be a void of compelling thought in the Episcopal Church about the Second Coming of Christ... a last Christmas. And yet without it, the reality of the *first* Christmas can end up fading into sweet nostalgia--and seem like only a story.

It can be uncomfortable to notice just how often and in how many ways the New Testament anticipates a last Christmas. It uses many different kinds of words and imaginative descriptions. Sometimes it is anticipating an *imminent pivotal moment within history*--like the Roman siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple that followed in the year 70 after Christ or a later time when the Roman persecution of Christians would end. Other times it is talking about *an ultimate revelation of Christ as time is enfolded into the eternal*. And sometimes it is hard to tell which it is, even having characteristics of both the historical and the ultimate at the same time, like in Mark today. And yet, in the New Testament and Christianity as a whole, there remains a *steady spiritual posture*, you might say, *of leaning forward toward an even fuller, ultimate, future experience of the God who came to us in Christmas*.

And you really don't even have to be an academic theologian or a priest to recognize this. *It can first be sensed by us as children*--when it seemed so strange that *after* Christmas Day everything would so quickly begin returning to *normal*. *But how can that be?! How can the enchantment of Christmas just end?* | And then when we get older and have more words at our disposal, we may sometime wonder to ourselves: *So, if God really did enter into our world in the birth of Jesus, then where is God now, in the midst of the continuing brokenness and sin of human experience?* There must be *something more coming*...there must be *something next*...that continues the Christmas revelation of God in Christ...and ultimately fulfills for the world the song of the angels: “Peace to earth and good will towards all”.

And so we are right to pray as we did earlier: “Almighty God, give us grace...now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; *that in the last day*, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.” *There must be something more*...*yet another Christmas that does not fade away*. | And so, next Sunday, there will be more to say.