

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)

*NOVEMBER 28, 1999*

Isaiah 63: 16b-17, 19b; 64: 2b-7; Psalm 80; 1Corinthians 1: 3-9; Mark 13: 33-37

Dear Preachers:

Is this season of Advent a time of pretend? Let's pretend that Christ has not come and that we are living in the time of Isaiah (first reading) awaiting the Messiah. Let's pretend that we are longing for the birth of the Messiah, singing songs about beating swords into plowshares, waiting for when the lion will lie down with the lamb. Even if we could go into a “religious amnesia,” the commercial world won't let us forget—Christmas is upon us. It's impossible to pretend that Christ has not come, we saw signs of it these past weeks in store windows and advertisements. I heard my first Christmas commercial two days after Halloween! Christmas is already the focus of our days, just a couple days after we finished the last of the Thanksgiving Day turkey. Our exclamations have already begun I need to make out my Christmas list! What shall I buy mom? Whom shall we have over for Christmas Eve? Where shall we celebrate Christmas Day? Do I have enough money for Christmas gifts? I need to get busy on the cards! Etc. We have begun to brace ourselves for the rush.

Was it only when we were children that Christmas and these weeks before Christmas had significance for us? We may have been good so that we wouldn't get coal in our stocking--but at least we were looking to our state of preparedness. At least we looked ahead with excitement and Christ's coming filled us with some awe as we gazed on the Christ child in the crib. But we are adults now and the sellers of merchandise want us to get ready for "the Big Day"; they have already begun the countdown. But before we check our gift list, run off to the stores and malls, plan the meals and the little parties preceding the Big Day--before we get crazy, think about what the Scriptures are saying today. They are calling us to be aware of another Big Day--the return of Christ.

We hear the longing of the people of Isaiah's day crying out to God. The prophet speaks for them, "Return for the sake of your servants." "Rend the heavens and come down." They were a people in trouble, enslaved and alienated from God; backs turned to the loving One who had chosen them and formed them into a people. They realize their desperate situation and Isaiah voices their longing for help. God will hear their cries and come to save them.

We are more like the biblical Jews than we realize, for we too are waiting for the coming Messiah, but this week our focus is on his Second Coming. Have we forgotten this important part of our faith, the belief that helped the early Church endure its hard times and kept its believers vigilant and strong in a hostile and unbelieving world? Have we been waiting so long as a church that we have lost attention, drifted off into a kind of doze? 2000 years have passed, who knows how many more will, before his return? Will he come in the new millennium? Or the one after that? Will he come at all? And what difference will it make anyhow? So, we'd rather focus on Christmas, that's just a few weeks away, closer to our day, and more certain. It feels more real, more tangible.

Not so fast. The Gospel won't let us shift our attention so easily. It is foreboding in its tone, gloomy in the picture it paints. "Stay awake, you do not know the appointed time...." "Do not let him catch you suddenly asleep...." "Be on guard." He is talking about some real moment in history when he will return and gather his faithful ones to himself; when he will put an end to death and suffering, gather us as a people with no more divisions, no more prejudices and misunderstandings. He is talking about a time when his hopes for us will finally be accomplished and what we long for will finally come to pass. Maybe we could get in touch with these deep longings of our spirit, as well as the longings of the Christian community to which we belong. We probably will have more to wait before his return, maybe longer than our own lifetime. But prompted by the lament and forthrightness of the Isaiah reading, let's sharpen our sense today to what is not yet in our world. Let's speak our dissatisfaction with the way things are, lest we grow dull in our vision and complacent about the status quo. The preacher can take on the voice of the people's complaint today, be Isaiah and name the problems we face, the struggles to bring about good in a world that has turned its back on God. But don't just speak for the world----speak for ourselves as well. Why has God let us stray so far from being God's people? Why can't we even pass on our faith to our own children, why isn't the faith we live attractive to them too? Is it how we live, or maybe don't live, our faith? Are we clinging to externals and failing to live the words of Jesus that he says will never pass away?

If we do lose our perspective and just resign ourselves to what it is, we will stop working for it to change, we will stop believing in the return of the Lord and the work he has assigned for us until he does. If we live the life Jesus calls us to, his return will not upset us--whether we meet him as one of the community he comes

to claim for his own at the Second Coming , or at the end of our own mortal lives. In fact, if we are prepared, we will greet his return with enthusiasm and a sigh of relief.

Life has its ways of catching us off guard. We or our loved ones have had moments that have thrown us off balance: a sudden reversal of health; a loss of a loved one, a collapse of a marriage; a loss of a job, etc. In order not to be thrown by these events, Jesus describes the life we need to live now, with a sharp eye of vigilance: standing guard at our life's doorways; letting in the good; barring the door to what is evil, small and corrupting to our faith. It is a faith nurtured by daily care and attentiveness that will sustain us when life plays one of its tricks on us.

Many of us will complain this Christmas time that we cannot get into the Spirit of Christmas. It's no wonder, we will be swamped by other spirits--the spirit of rush, the spirit of fatigue, the spirit of tinsel and illusion, the spirit of false expectations, the spirit of greed, etc. Whether we feel the Christmas Spirit or not will depend on how we have tended to Advent, these next weeks of preparation. The season has just begun, we have time to gain some control over it, to direct its pace and passage before it controls us and runs away with us. The message this day is a reminder to be alert in our waiting for Christ. We can't pretend he hasn't come, but we can wait for his next arrival in prayer and longing. We can reflect on our world scarred by war, starvation, oppression and the neglect of millions. And we can long for the Savior's coming with light and direction for us. We sit in a dark world longing to see the face of Christ at our door, longing for him to show us the way and give us a renewed desire to follow only him.

QUOTABLE: (For Advent)

**And then all that has divided us will merge  
And then compassion will be wedded to power  
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind  
And then both men and women will be gentle  
And then no person will be subject to another's will  
And then all will be rich and free and varied  
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many  
And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance  
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old  
And then all will nourish the young  
And then all will cherish life's creatures**

**And then all will live in harmony with each other and the Earth  
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.**

**-----Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party***

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

Our webpage addresses:

<http://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching"

Jude Siciliano, OP

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