

The Spiral of Time in the Christian Year

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

November 29, 2009 (Advent 1)

Trinity Episcopal Church, Aurora, IL

The Rev. Charles A. de Kay

May the Lord be gracious and shine God's light into our hearts and into this sacred mystery of the church from this day forth forever more. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good morning!

Did you have a good thanksgiving? I hope so. I hope, too, that if you participated in the recent traditions of Black Friday's shopping sprees, it was not only successful, but safe. This morning, as Christians, we turn the page and begin anew. Welcome to Advent. Happy New Year!

Just as Easter – our commemoration of the Lord's victory over death in the Resurrection – has its Lenten time of preparation; so Christmas – our commemoration of the Lord's birth as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem – has its Advent time of preparation. And just as Mardi Gras – Fat Tuesday, Shrove Tuesday – let's us get our worldly wiggles out in one big party before we settle into Lent; so Thanksgiving and Black Friday give us the chance to participate in the pleasures of eating and drinking, and our great American pastime, shopping, before we settle into the vigil of Advent. I do hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving weekend. Advent has arrived.

Advent is the beginning of the Christian year. Now, "the lessons for Advent, especially the first two weeks of Advent, can seem foreign and even discomfoting to many congregations. The pressure to sign Christmas carols the moment Thanksgiving is over can be overwhelming."¹ Christmas music is sure to rule the airwaves now on the radio and in the stores. We may desperately want to decorate the church sanctuary with Christmas greens, like the retail world in many places already has. Why should the secular world out-Christmas the church? We may want to join the rush to Christmas, but we'd be missing something precious and essential in our spiritual journey.

We're going to look at the particulars of Advent in our Adult Forum this morning at 10:45 for everyone who can join us. Let me simply quote biblical scholar Gale O'Day, who writes "Advent's essential and distinctive contribution to the Christian story is its highlighting of the centrality and sacredness of time."² As in other areas of our lives, living faithfully asks us to change our perspective on basic elements, fundamentals that we take for granted. How we understand time, how we look at time, how think about time, may be quite different as people of faith.

¹ Gail R. O'Day in *Interpretation* (October 2008).

² Ibid.

Most people, most of the time, think of time as linear. Time is a straight line with a middle point, where we stand, called the present. On one side of us is the past and on the other the future. It's been described moving us along like a conveyor belt, with the present spot moving ever into the past, as we are brought further and further into the future. The linear idea of time is not bad. In fact, it's critical if we are to measure human progress. It's not, however, how "we experience time in the deepest part of ourselves, on the level of our hearts, and it's not the way God experiences time."³

For most of human history, people experienced time very differently. The pattern was not a horizontal line but a circle or cycle. The cycles of the days, the weeks, the seasons, as we followed the cycles of the sun, the moon and the stars were important. The cycle of life and death – both of people and more critically of plants and animals that gave us food to live on – was at the heart of our survival. The image of the circle expands the one-dimensional timeline into a two-dimensional circle and so takes in more of reality.

The Christian year, which we begin today, is a variation on the circular image of time. Instead of a circle, we have a spiral – a circle that grows outward and upward, moving vertically as well as horizontally, taking in three dimensions instead of two. Imagine a tornado. Turn it upside down and you have the image of the holy spiral. The image breaks out of the limitations of the one-dimensional line and the two-dimensional circle, by adding height and depth of eternity. "Year, season, month, week, day and hour, all make concentric circles that lead deeper and deeper into the center, the present moment, where we live in the presence of God. And the present time ripples outward again, connecting us with all time and the cosmos."⁴

"The rich Advent themes of silence, simplicity, waiting and deepening our perspective fit well with the paradox of timelessness intertwined with time that the spiraling days suggest to us. Advent reassures us that even at the lowest point of dark and cold, we are not alone. Allowing ourselves at this point in the calendar to enter into the mystery becomes a tonic for the soul – reminding us that the unseen surrounds even our most mundane existences. Our acts of waiting and preparation are powered by the hope that God can somehow fit through this crack in time and come to us. At any moment the every day can be transformed into wonders to behold."⁵

Christian monk and mystic, Thomas Merton once wrote "Christ has given special meaning and power to the cycle of season, which of themselves are good and by their very nature have a capacity to signify our life in God. Jesus made this ebb and flow of light and darkness, activity and rest, birth and death, the sign of a higher life, a life we live in Him."⁶

³ Christopher Hill, *Holidays and Holy Nights*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, pp. 7-8

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Isabel Anders, M.A., *Synthesis*, vol.22, no. 11, November 2009, p. 12.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*.

“So – how will we take advantage of this new beginning – that is also a continuation of an unbroken personal lifeline, and a chance to merge our own history and actions with God’s time? Each soul’s experience through these days will be as unique as a fingerprint. Yet some truths will always hold.

“Now when we return to the same spot in the cycle, we arrive at it somewhat further along than last year. We may be able to look at our lives differently, in light of how we have grown in understanding, or in other measurements since last Advent. What we do with this knowledge is up to us.

“Have we learned to listen better, to wait with more patience, to uncover dimensions of being human or being God’s people that we might not have experienced in the past? How we convey and practice these learnings can be part of our Advent discipline and worship this year.

“What enhanced understandings of ‘Christ in us’ and ‘God with us’ will carry us forward through whatever events in the world and in our individual lives may challenge us in these times.

“How do we wish to emerge into the Light of Christ at Christmas, a monumental celebration of Christ’s coming that puts all his little ‘comings’ to us throughout the year(s) into perspective?”⁷

May Advent this year bring us all a fresh start, spiraling upward in new ways as we continue our journey together. In God’s holy name. Amen.

⁷ Isabel Anders, *op. cit.*