

## **First Sunday of Advent (Blessing of Wreath)**

December 1-2, 2018      St. Augustine Cathedral   4:00 pm (Vigil)

There are some events in our lives that are so significant that we know immediately, when someone says a date or a reference, all the details of that major moment.

For most of us here, all we have to do is refer to September 11, 2001, and all the shock and fear of the terrorist attack against our country comes flooding back into our memories: the horror of seeing two different airliners fly into both Towers of the World Trade Center, and the subsequent trauma of watching both those towers collapse. In addition, of course, the attack on the Pentagon shortly after the attack on the Twin Towers, and finally the heroic and sacrificial action of 37 passengers and six crew members on Flight 93, as it was also heading for an unknown additional target in Washington, thwarted that attempt and gave their lives by crashing the plane into a field in Shanksville, Pa. All we have to do is say "9/11" and we remember "that day" completely

Or for any one of us, we can remember with vivid detail the year/month/day/and moment when someone very close to us passed on to their eternal reward. All we have to do is say the person's name, and all the memories of "that day" come flooding back.

Or on a much happier note, every child here knows when we say the word "Christmas" exactly when "that day" is; in fact, they probably know that it's 23 days and counting until Santa comes to town!

Those "days" of great significance stand out in our mind and heart, and all that they mean are with us in an instant. In a way that's what we heard in today's Scripture Readings as well.

Jeremiah talked about the "days that are coming" that the Lord promised to send the people of Israel who had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians, and were living in a strange land. "Those days" meant to every faithful Jewish person the day that would be greater than any other---it was the day when the Lord would "redeem" them---when they could be liberated from captivity and return to their homeland.

Jesus used the same phrasing in today's Gospel: Don't let "*drowsiness*" or other distractions catch you by surprise when "*that day*" comes. As Jesus continued: "*that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth*".

The difference is that God's Word is reminding us about a future moment that will be one of the most significant moments in our lives or in the history of the world---the "moment" when the Son of Man will return in Glory and the end of the world takes place. No one knows when "that day"---the day of Jesus' Second Coming---will come. It might come tomorrow; it might not come for another 1,000 years. But we know that one day---"that day"---will come. And neither do we know when "that day" will come for each of us---when the end of our lives will take place. It might be tomorrow; it might not be for many years to come. But what we **do** know is "that day" will come.

The world has been around for so long that we have a tendency to assume that it will always be here. But our rational mind tells us that everything finite has a beginning and an end. We don't know exactly how old the world is. Scientists have various theories on how long the world has existed, from several million years to several billion years. I asked the expert earlier today; I asked Alexa, and she said without even a second to ponder the question: "the Earth is 4 billion, 540 million years old". So who can argue with Alexa, right?

The reality that the world will end, or that our lives will end, can cause some people to be frightened. But for us, as People of Faith, we should look toward "that day" with Hope, because that will be "the day" when Jesus fulfills His Promise as He spoke it to the Apostles: "*I will come back and take you with Me, so that where I am, you also may be.*"

Today is the first day of the Season of Advent. We have just transitioned from completing one Liturgical Year earlier today, and with this Vigil Mass, we launch a new Liturgical Year. We also refer to it as a new Year of Grace---another year to open ourselves to God's Presence with us, and the graces that He offers us to help us live in His Love. We begin today another Year to take more seriously what our basic vocation in life is---to grow in holiness, and to become more like Jesus in the way we live our lives.

Advent is the second shortest liturgical season of the Year, and this year, it's even shorter than usual. The Fourth Week of Advent will last not quite two days since Christmas is on a Tuesday this year. While Advent is one of the shortest, it's

also one of the most important Liturgical seasons because it reminds us who we are, where we're heading and what is truly important.

That's why Jesus' strong advice is so important today: *"Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life."* We can easily understand how drunkenness and carousing can make us "drowsy", but how do anxieties cause us to be drowsy? We can allow our many anxieties, worries, fears, or concerns to distract us from the Hope that Jesus wants us to place in Him. How many times did Jesus say to His Apostles, and to us: "Do not be afraid!"

Certainly there are concerns that we have, and worries that bother us in our daily lives, and perhaps at some points they can turn into personal traumas that greatly upset our lives. Jesus told us that there would be those kinds of moments in our natural world as well, as we heard Him say: *"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in disarray."*

I'm sure the people in Anchorage who experienced a 7.0 earthquake yesterday feared that the end of their world was taking place. Or the people in California over the last many weeks who experienced the devastation of the wildfires in which thousands of people lost everything, and dozens of people lost their lives--- --that must have caused them to worry that the End had come for them. But Jesus tells us that when we see those things happen, in our personal lives or in the world around us, we should *"stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand."*

Advent is so much more than an "opening act" for Christmas; Advent reminds us at the beginning of every new Liturgical Year that we are mortal human beings, who will have an end to our mortal lives, but because we are baptized into Christ--because we are a follower of Jesus---because we are doing our very best to live our daily lives according to Jesus' teachings, and not according to the ways of the world----because as St. Paul told us in today's Second Reading we are trying to make our love for God and one another abound and increase----because of all of that: Jesus promises us that we will share in His Victory on "that day" when He comes again in Glory. We have nothing to fear. Jesus does give us one condition to that Promise: *"Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man."* In other words, don't get "drowsy" or distracted; we must pay attention to, and choose to live according to, what God shows us to be eternally important.

Advent is all about Hope. Hope doesn't mean the same thing as "wish", like we might have on our Letter to Santa list or our Christmas "gift wishes". No, Hope is rooted in our Faith in Jesus, and because He came into the world on Christmas to be our Savior, and because He willingly suffered, died and rose again on Easter to gain for us our Salvation, and because we follow Jesus in our lives to the best of our ability----that is what it means to place our Hope in Christ and to be confident that He will be faithful to His Promise when He comes on "that day".

In that sense, Advent is more than a 4-week Liturgical Season----Advent is an "attitude" that we live each day of our lives. Or, using the words of my own Episcopal Motto, we live our lives "waiting in joyful Hope"---we continue looking forward to "that day" with Advent Hope through all the days of our lives.

*God bless you, now and always!*