

## ADVENT I

***Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Luke 21: 25 ff***

Advent I. The beginning of a new year in the Church. And the beginning of a period of watchful waiting, as we anticipate, every year, the birth of the Christ Child, the coming of the one who will be the Messiah, the Savior.

But our Advent Gospels open with prophecies of the eschaton, the end times, the Day of Judgement, the Day of Reckoning. The time when everything will change. Dramatically, cataclysmically.

Jesus' vivid description of the End Times, and the drawing near of redemption, falls into the category of things he most probably didn't say. The visions of destruction and distress contained in the Gospels are widely believed to refer to an event that occurred several decades after Jesus' death: the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans.

Of course, for the Jews, the fall of the Temple was indeed a disaster: the demolition not only of their center of worship but of what they believed, literally, was the center of their world. However Jesus, had Jesus known of this catastrophic event, he might have said, *good riddance!* Remember, one of his last acts before being arrested – one of the precipitating causes of his arrest – was his trouble-making in that very Temple, his denunciation of the corruption and venality the Temple had come to represent.

So we hear Jesus, in Luke's account, anticipating a world-changing event that will inspire not only fear and loss but also redemption and new beginnings. *Wait*, he says, *watch and wait*, for the *time is coming and now is*.

*Fear and loss but also redemption and new beginnings. Wait, watch and wait, for the time is coming and now is.*

Jesus may not in fact have made this prophecy about the End Times, but his vision is consistent with his prophetic gift: his capacity to see deeply into the heart of a broken world and proclaim what's wrong and what needs to be fixed. And the picture of crisis presented here expressed his sense of urgency, his impatience with the old order

and his yearning for the day when the realm of God will truly arrive. And the passage expresses a universal truth: the prospect of change inspires both dread and fear, and excitement, joy, and hope.

*Wait, watch and wait, for the time is coming and now is. Change is at hand, be ready.*

Now I have to admit that waiting is one of the things I do worst. When I want something to happen, want it badly, my nature is to try to make it happen. Watching and waiting does not come naturally to me, and to practice waiting takes strenuous discipline..

Five and a half years ago, when civil marriage equality was about to be implemented in Massachusetts, I gathered a small group of priests to meet with Bishop Shaw. We had been told that we would not be permitted to *solemnize* same-sex, marriages; that is, our ability to act as agents of the state in marrying heterosexual couples did not extend to gay couples. The reasoning was that the Prayer Book rubrics describe marriage as between a man and a woman, and our rubrics function as canon law.

The folks who met with Tom Shaw all felt we would have difficulty abiding by this compromise: that we could ‘bless’ same-sex marriages but must have a justice of the peace or clergy of another denomination perform the legal part.

The bishop listened patiently as we expressed our views to him, and then he eloquently asked us to wait. *The Church is not ready*, he said. *I think it will be more faithful if we wait.* Tears began to roll down my cheeks. “I think I’m faithful,” I said. “I love the Church. But I preside over a community who have been waiting all their lives. I’m not sure we can wait any longer.”

As some of you remember, I had promised to celebrate one “disobedient” wedding. I told our vestry, and I told the Bishop, that I had to celebrate one wedding, entirely, as a matter of conscience and solidarity. But we all understood that if I were to defy the bishop repeatedly, I would be inhibited from functioning as a priest, and nobody (or not many) wanted that.

In the spring of 2004, my father was dying. I was on sabbatical, shuttling back and forth between here and Maine, participating in the run-up to, and then the arrival of, May 17 in Massachusetts; and back in Portland, helping move my mother out of her home of almost 60 years and sitting by my father in his last days.

As the wedding date approached, it was clear Dad didn’t have long to live. I had a superstitious feeling that whatever decision I made about the weekend, I’d be in the

wrong place. If I cancelled my trip to Boston, Dad would linger. If I came, he would die. I decided to come.

And indeed, the night before the wedding, my family called: Dad had died. I began to make plans for someone else to celebrate the wedding the next day, and to return to Portland. Then my sister called. “Annie,” she said. “We’ve decided you should stay there. You’ve been waiting 20 years to do this wedding. You need to do it.” Then my mother got on the phone. “You know what your father would want,” she said. And so I stayed.

I celebrated the wedding, the bishop gave me a godly admonition, and since then I’ve been abiding by the compromise – making the best I could of it by asking *all* couples to find someone else to “solemnize” their marriages, to do the legal part.

I’ve been waiting. Waiting for something to happen. Waiting for the Church to change. Waiting for the Church to catch up with God, God’s love, God’s passion for justice.

Well, my dear friends, as of today, that waiting has come to an end. Yesterday the clergy of the diocese of Massachusetts received from Bishop Shaw that begins

Christian marriage is a sacramental rite that has evolved in the church, along with confirmation, ordination, penance, and the anointing of the sick, and while it is not necessary for all, *it must be open to all as a means of grace and sustenance to our Christian hope.*

I believe this because the truth of it is in our midst, revealed again and again by the many marriages—of women and men, and of persons of the same gender—that are characterized, just as our church expects, by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, and the holy love which enables spouses to see in one another the image of God.

And goes on to say

Your bishops understand this to mean for us here in the Diocese of Massachusetts that the clergy of this diocese may, at their discretion, solemnize marriages for all eligible couples, beginning Advent I. Solemnization, in accordance with Massachusetts law, includes hearing the declaration of consent, pronouncing the marriage and signing the marriage certificate.

This morning we just heard the prophet Jeremiah: *The days are surely coming, says God, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of*

*Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*

I've been struggling to grasp, and to express, the full meaning of this change. As May 17 2004 approached, Jeff Mello talked to me about his mixed feelings: combination of joy and expectation, sorrow and anger. "Why?" I asked. "I think it's the realization of the magnitude of what has been withheld," he said, and that phrase haunts me.

*The magnitude of what has been withheld.* It goes as deep as our theology can go, as deep as our understanding of the great mystery at the heart of God. We talk about our sacraments *as outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace*. Our sacraments are our most profound expression of our relationship with God, God's grace, God's active presence in our lives and the life of the world. The Episcopal Church has seven sacraments: Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, Anointing the Sick, Reconciliation, and Ordination. Until today, one of those sacraments has been universally withheld from faithful Episcopalians who happen to love, and wish to marry, someone of the same sex.

And now, finally, in this diocese at least, we are living into our claim and our promise to be a fully inclusive Church. That magnitude of sacramental withholding has come to an end. The Church—our little patch of it at any rate—The Church has caught up with God. One long wait is over.

Of course, it's still Advent. And as Tom Ward pointed out to me last week with his customary theological wisdom, there's always something to wait for. We're waiting for the rest of the country to follow our lead in implementing civil marriage equality. And we'll be waiting for the rest of the Church to catch up with us, and with God.

Not everyone, of course, will view this change with unabashed delight. Some Episcopalians – those who have already split with the Episcopal Church USA and some who haven't – will consider the solemnization of same-sex marriages as akin to the Destruction of the Temple.

But the Destruction of the Temple, at first glance a devastation and a desolation, turned out to be the making of a new Judaism. Judaism ceased to be an edifice ruled by priests and the profit motive, a practice of rigid law, picayune rules, and judgment. The practice of Jewish faith moved into small synagogues and homes, it became a tradition of study, and personal and family prayer. With the Destruction of the Temple, I believe, Judaism evolved into something resembling what the great prophets of Hebrew Scripture, and Jesus, imagined and hoped for. It became, far more than it had been for centuries, a

religion of the people.

And something similar may well happen to our Episcopal Church. Some may leave because of the bishops' decision. But when Bishop Shaw asked the clergy in September – maybe 150 of us at Clergy Day– how many had participated in some way in the blessing of a same-sex marriage, about 3/4 of us raised our hands. He gasped in surprise. And earlier in November, our diocesan convention overwhelmingly passed a resolution asking the bishops to grant us the permission they've just given us.

The bishops were not bound by this vote. The decision is theirs. But they heard the people speak, they heard us call out for justice, equality, and inclusivity. And Bishop Shaw says in the conclusion of his statement:

We also know that by calling us to minister in the context of this particular place and time God is again blessing our diocese with a great challenge by which we might enter more fully into that ethic of love which Jesus speaks to us through the New Testament. It is an immeasurable love given for all. We are being asked to live it, all of us, children of God, each with equal claim upon the love, acceptance and pastoral care of this church, so that the newness and fullness of life promised through word and sacrament might be for all people and for the completion of God's purpose for the world.

This change will not come without cost. No change ever does. That's the message Luke has Jesus deliver today. *There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. But then, in the next breath, comes the good news.*

*Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*

Today, my dear friends, I believe that our redemption, the redemption of the Church, has drawn a bit nearer. The realm of God is just a little closer. And though I'm not supposed to say it in Advent, I'll be disobedient once again. *Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Amen

