

First Sunday of Advent – Year B

“But we’ve always done it that way.”

Who of us have not heard those words spoken to us when we have suggested a new approach to something our pointed out a weakness of how things are currently being done?

Maybe we’ve even heard ourselves say it when confronted with an idea that will make us change the way we do things.

Accepted practices, when done for a long time, can take on the feeling of being like heaven and earth—unshakeable! The way things just are and ever shall be!

Advent is an important moment in the church’s year; an important first moment because it highlights a quality of the Lord’s presence in our lives and the life of the church: he’s coming. He is present to us in the very act of being on the way to us.

It’s not only true that he’s been here and set us up in the life of faith and the traditions of the Church. He’s also coming, and he calls us to look forward to his coming, to watch for it and to be ready.

That will be hard to do if our sole focus in on the way things have always been.

Watching for the Lord’s coming is not always easy. What will it look like? What are its qualities?

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What are the things in our lives and in our world that threaten to block our vision? Comfort, perhaps? Or fear? Or just being too caught up in how busy life can become?

One of the images we encounter in today's Gospel is that of the fig tree and its bud. Buds offer promise. They are already green, but not ripe. They are the beginning of something that will come to full fruition later on.

But the arrival of buds on the tree also indicates that it's time to get to work. There was a story in the paper last week about the Christmas tree farms in the area, and what goes into getting trees ready for market.

If you want a shapely Christmas tree, someone is going to have to pay attention to when the tree starts to put forth new growth, because its when the new growth appears that the trimming and pruning has to take place.

How does this all translate to our spiritual life? I think one way that happens is to be in touch with what it is we long for. Where do our hopes lie when it comes to the things of God?

For many, the first thing that comes to mind is that they would like to have restored what has been lost. "I miss how things were when I was growing up." If we're not careful, such a

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sentiment can cause us to try to recreate the past. Christmas especially awakens in us all sorts of nostalgic feelings. And nostalgia works in the opposite direction of watchfulness.

We can still use those fond feelings we have of earlier days, though. A thought I have found helpful is the think that what is coming is going to be at least a good as what I remember fondly from former days, and if God's promises can be trusted, even better!

Does what we hope for make room for that, that God has something in store for us that is beyond what we can even ask for or imagine?

One of the impressions that today's gospel leaves us is that there is a kind of division of labor among those who are waiting for the Lord: you've got your workers, each with his own task, and the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

There are "doorkeepers" in our midst who have a keen sense for reading the signs of the times and the action of the Holy Spirit at this particular moment in time. But I think each of us really has to incorporate both tasks.

For one thing, not everyone who sounds the alarm that the master is arriving can be believed. When we hear the alarm we have to look and decide on the basis of what we know to look for.

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The one thing we can't do is fall into the trap of thinking that, since it's been so long, he's probably not coming back. That is simply a form of falling asleep spiritually.

What Jesus says, he says to all, doorkeepers and workers alike: "Keep awake!"