

First Sunday of Advent, Yr. A
November 27, 2016
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A couple weeks ago I made mention of the fact that toward the end of the liturgical year our Scripture readings focus on the end of the world. So today, the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new year, you may have been expecting a change of subject. But here we are, lighting the first candle in our wreath, and it's still “be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come”, and “the day is at hand, so throw off the works of darkness.”

In our first reading, though, from Isaiah, we do start to work back from the final coming of Christ at the end of time, through his middle coming, toward his first coming. His first coming was his earthly life-- born in Bethlehem, preaching good news, dying and rising. But what do I mean by his “middle coming”?

There are a few present day blog prophets who talk about a middle coming of Christ and expect it to happen soon. They describe it as a kind of earthly kingdom, a sudden and dramatic change in human civilization due to an eruption of grace into human affairs. Bad people will be converted or wiped away, justice and peace will prevail, faith and religious devotion will fill every human heart.

Well, I did a little digging and discovered that this understanding of the middle coming of Christ owes a lot to a 12th century Italian monk named Joachim de Fiore. Joachim said that history was divided into three ages, corresponding to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Old Testament, characterized by fear and servile obedience, is the age of the Father. The New Testament, characterized by faith and filial obedience, is the age of the Son. The age of the Holy Spirit would be one of love and liberty. The traditional governing structures of human society would give way to the guidance of contemplative monks. Wars would cease, universal love would reign, and everyone would live according to the Beatitudes of Jesus until the end of time. Joachim calculated that the age of the Holy Spirit would commence about the year 1260. Well, when 1260 came and went his theories went out of style, but they have a way of popping back up from time to time.

For example, what's supposed to happen when the moon is in the seventh house and Jupiter aligns with Mars? Why, peace will guide the planets, and love will steer the stars! “This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, the Age of Aquarius” Besides influencing the Fifth Dimension, Joachim is the source of the erroneous interpretation of the Thousand Year Reign in chapter 20 of the Book of Revelation, and the unacknowledged source of the middle coming predictions of today's blog prophets.

However, despite the confusion inspired by Joachim de Fiore, there really is a middle

coming of Christ. It's just not what he envisioned. It's the type of coming that we are already familiar with, and is expressed in our penitential rite:

“You came to gather the nations into the peace of God's kingdom.

You come in word and sacrament to strengthen us in holiness.

You will come in glory with salvation for your people.”

You came (first coming), you come in word and sacrament (middle coming), you will come in glory (the final coming at the end of history).

This middle coming, through the ministry of the Church and other ways, is hinted at in today's Gospel. Jesus is referring to his final coming when he speaks of a thief breaking into a house at an unexpected time. But this interesting figure of speech (Jesus breaking and entering? really?) is very similar to another that he once used when he was expelling evil spirits from afflicted people. On that occasion he said,

“When a strong man fully armed guards his palace, his possessions go undisturbed. But when one stronger than he attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils.” (Lk. 11:21-22)

This is not about the end of time; it's about Christ freeing us from spiritual bondage in the present time-- it's about his middle coming. The strong man fully armed is Satan. His palace is this world. His possessions are those whom he holds captive because they are captive to those works of darkness mentioned by St. Paul – jealousy, rivalry, lust, drunkenness. People who think they are liberated because they do whatever they want are not free; they are slaves to their appetites, and so slaves of Satan.

This is the great deception of our times, so many millions of people thinking that they are liberated when they are actually enslaved, chained by all those sins and addictions that are damaging and destroying so many lives. They are suffering from a kind of spiritual Stockholm syndrome, when hostages start to identify with their captors and cooperate with them, like Patty Hearst robbing banks with the Symbionese Liberation Army.

Who is the one stronger than Satan, who attacks and overcomes him, strips him of his armor and frees the hostages? It is Christ, freeing people from evil spirits of pride and anger, lust and addiction. He is doing it today – through his word and sacraments, through personal prayer and prayer groups, through spiritual reading and careful counseling – in other words, through all the ways and means readily available every day during this time of his middle coming.

If it helps you get motivated, think of Christ as the leader of a spiritual SWAT team. If you need to be delivered they can get the job done. But you need to cooperate. Do not cling to your captors. They are not your friends. Don't fight your rescuers. They are your friends. When the first stun grenade of grace comes through your window and Christ

begins to break down your door kick the devil hard and run for the exit. Angels will have you covered, and the saints of God will pull you to safety.