

**Sermon Preached November 29, 2009**  
**Year C, Advent 1**  
**St. Paul's Episcopal Church**  
**North Andover, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson**

Oh come, oh come Emmanuel. Amen.

There's a Native American woman living in Alaska who grew up in the town of Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island. The island is located in the Bering Strait between the US mainland and Russia. This woman happily talks with visitors about her island and life there. One person was honestly curious about the long winter months when hunting was limited and when darkness ruled the day. "What do you do?" the man asked, "Do you kind of hibernate like a bear?" "No," she responded. "There is much to be done during the winter. It's then that we make our clothes, mend our nets, sharpen our spears, fix our berry baskets, and rest our wounds. Spring will come and we need to be ready for it. We don't just sit around in the dark waiting for the light to come."<sup>1</sup> Appropriate words for the beginning of Advent.



Advent is the beginning of the new church year. It's the time when we wait for the coming, the advent, of the Christ child. Like winter for the Native American woman, Advent is not a time of inactivity, but a season of quiet, mindful, preparation. It's a time of darkness as we wait for the light of Christ to enter our lives and our hearts.

Unlike the malls, the church doesn't believe the Christmas season begins the day after Thanksgiving. We first must live into the season of Advent, the season of preparation. A few years ago I sent a peevish e-mail to the VISA credit card company because they had a promotion where if one bought items on their card during the 12 days of Christmas, one was eligible for prizes. However, they considered the 12 days of Christmas to be the 12 SHOPPING days PRIOR to Christmas. In other words: December 13 - 24th. I reminded them that those days were in Advent, an entirely different season. The 12 days of Christmas run from December 25 until January 5<sup>th</sup>. I confess that, being annoyed, I hinted that they could be hit with law suits if they didn't hand out prizes during the real days of Christmas after the 25<sup>th</sup>. I noticed they never ran that campaign again.... ☺

All of our readings today focus on the coming of the Lord. The reading from Jeremiah looks to the first coming of Jesus, from the house of David. The second reading from First Thessalonians looks to the second coming of Jesus. The Gospel reading is apocalyptic in nature. It also looks to the second coming, the end times. It views the coming of the Lord as a time of earthquakes and floods. The heavens and earth will be shaken. They're fearful visions which seems far removed from our usual understanding of the first coming of the Lord, gentle Jesus, meek and mild. A cuddly baby in a manger.

It seems at odds to speak of the end times when we are at the beginning of the church year preparing for the beginning of the incarnation. But there's a reason for this.

In the reading from Luke, the Israelites are living under Roman rule in Palestine. They are looking for release from their captors. When Jesus says to them "there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress" this is not bad news to them. When he says "people will faint from fear and foreboding" they are not afraid.

In fact, Jesus encourages them that when the Son of Man appears they are to “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

This passage from Luke is designed to give hope to a church under threat.

It’s actually a very positive reading. The people are comforted and given hope by the promise of the coming Kingdom. God has not forgotten them or their troubles. God is coming!

To those of us who know that Jesus is the messiah, we may wonder why he speaks of the coming of the Lord to his disciples. Isn’t he there with them already? The answer is found in the Christian understanding of time. Someone once called it a “bi-focal vision of time.” The Kingdom has already happened, and yet still is in the process of happening. We see both at the same time. We live with hope both because of what Christ has done and what he has yet to do.

When Jesus was born, God became flesh. It was the breaking in of that which is spirit into the world of matter. The Kingdom of God began breaking into our earthly realm. Our temporal understanding of time was torn and the eternal entered in. It continued and was more fully realized with Christ's death and resurrection. But even so it's not yet complete. We need only look around to know we do not live in a perfect world. The Kingdom is only partially here. It is both already and not yet.

When Christ spoke of the coming of the Son of Man, he was speaking of the fulfillment of the Kingdom. His initial coming in a manger began a process which is currently still happening and which will come to fruition at some later date. During the Great Thanksgiving we often recite the words, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Past, present, and future hope are tied together in the person of Jesus Christ.

In addition, we live with the knowledge of Emmanuel. Emmanuel is Hebrew for “God with us.” As Christians we know that God is eternally present with us and will stand by us always. This creates another tension. You see, we wait for the coming of the Lord while simultaneously knowing that God is present with us right now. Oh come, oh come Emmanuel. God is with us, yet we know God is still to come.

Advent is the season when we wait in the darkness. It’s not an inactive hibernation, but an active waiting and preparation. We don’t just sit around in the dark waiting for the light to come. We prepare our hearts and minds through prayer and joyful expectation. We help the poor and needy. We read the Bible. We tell others about the joy we have in church. We wait for the coming of the Christ child, while simultaneously waiting for the future day of the Kingdom of God. At the same time, we know that through it all, God is with us. Time: past, present, and future, are all present in the person of Jesus.

A bringer of hope. We are people of hope. We wait in expectation for the fulfillment of God’s promises and we know that God is with us no matter what our troubles. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel!

Amen.