

RENDING HEAVEN

Sermon, November 29, 2020

First Sunday of Advent

Texts: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37; I Corinthians 1:3-9

In just a few weeks we'll be once again reading the familiar words of Isaiah, "*Unto us a child has been born, unto us a son has been given.*" Some of you may remember my telling you that with words similar to these, a messenger once raced into the Roman Senate and announced, "*Unto us a child has been born, the next ruler of the world!*" That took place sixty-six years before the birth of Christ. In an aristocratic community of Rome, a child had indeed been born; a son had indeed been given. His name was Gaius Octavius, and he was the grand nephew of Julius Caesar. Those of you who know your history know Julius Caesar had no sons, so Octavius would go on to be his adopted son and heir. Octavius grew up in the palace. He was educated by the finest teachers of the empire in literature, philosophy, and government. At the age of eighteen (!) he ascended the throne of Rome after the March 15, 44 BC murder of Julius Caesar.

The repercussions of the assassination of Julius Caesar helped plunge the Roman empire into chaos. Fifteen years after ascending the throne, at the age **thirty-three**, Gaius Octavius finally secured the blessings of peace, stability and order throughout the vast Roman Empire, initiating the era known as the Pax Romana (*the Roman Peace*); this adopted son of Julius Caesar was then given the unofficial title "Prince of Peace." Also that year, when he was thirty-three years old, the Roman Senate conferred upon Octavius the title "Caesar Augustus," which means "Caesar, the Exalted One." His full official title was "*Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus.*" The "Divi Filius" portion means "Son of the Divine" (*two years after his murder, Julius Caesar was acknowledged as a divinity via "apotheosis," which is the term for the elevation of someone to divine status*). Now, as the uncontested ruler of the entire Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus, the Prince of Peace, the Son of the Divine, just had to give the word and armies would march, ships would sail, and the world would move for him. Which is exactly what happened when he was sixty-six years of age ... when he was sixty-six, he decreed a census be taken of the entire Roman world. By his mandate, everyone was to return to their home towns for this census to be counted with their families of origin. That should sound familiar to you, for that census is recorded in the Gospel according to Luke, chapter two.

Just as a brief aside, most of you know I'm now the same age Caesar Augustus was when he issued this decree. I would have liked to issue a similar decree this past week so I could have gone to my home town to be counted with my family this Thanksgiving! It was the first Thanksgiving in well over a decade that I was free to travel to my home town, and I was so looking forward to spending time with my mother (*whom I've not seen since February!*) but this year our "Caesars" issued an edict telling us to NOT travel. We were also directed to limit our Thanksgiving "celebrations" to members of our own households, so I had Thanksgiving with my two cats ... the first time in all my sixty-six years that I had Thanksgiving alone. Thank you for the invitations I received from several of you, but I opted to grudgingly honor the governors' edicts in Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, though I thought them unnecessarily extreme and even harsh (*especially to those who are always alone!*) ... there's more than a sermon in itself here, and I'll only touch on this briefly, but there's a significant difference between disagreement and disobedience. For now I'll just say that civil *debate* is healthy, even necessary, in a democratic republic; civil *disobedience* is only an extreme (*and extremely rare*) last resort. In a democratic republic, we don't have Caesars who are to *rule*; we have representatives who are to *govern* according to the established laws and procedures of the land. "Caesar" is the people ... the government in a democratic republic is only justified and lawful when consented to by the people ... via the representative and legislative processes, as embodied in the voting ballot. When the legislative process is ignored, or the legitimacy of the ballot is in question, the republic is seriously threatened.

As Luke records for us, Caesar Augustus sent out a decree "*... that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.*" Everyone was required to go back to their home towns to register for this census. It was during this census that another child was born, another son was given, in a rather un-aristocratic village, in a rather unimportant corner of the Empire. No messenger ran to the Roman Senate to announce this child's birth. Instead, it was God's angelic messenger who announced the birth of Jesus Christ to the least of the Empire's inhabitants, a small band of shepherds who were out watching their flocks by night: "*I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Christ, the Lord.*" This other child began His life in a manger, which is a feeding bin for cows and sheep. He was not raised in a palace, but in a common Jewish home. He was not educated by the finest teachers in the Empire in literature, philosophy and government, he was educated in carpentry. And at age thirty-three, His thirty-third year, He, too, secured the blessings of peace for His people not by ascending to a Roman throne, but to a Roman cross. In that ultimate act of sacrifice, Jesus revealed Himself as the King of a whole new kingdom that has long outlived and will continue to outlive every earthly empire. To this very day, He just has to give the word and His hope and salvation can break into any life in the world. That's what we proclaim at Advent and celebrate at Christmas! There is a Savior King who is the *true* Prince of Peace, the true

Son of God, the true Exalted One. Emmanuel, God With Us. He has come. He will save. And He will come again. Now, hold that thought for a moment.

In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah cries out to God, *"Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!"* Isaiah's plea was a plea of desperation on behalf of people who were returning from exile to find a devastated city, a ruined temple, and discovering to their dismay that coming back home was not the glorious vision they were expecting it to be. And so the prophet pleads for God to just tear open the heavens; he wants God to burst through the clouds like a football team captain bursts through one of those paper barriers leading his team into the arena. He wants God to enter the arena of this world with power and might and make Himself known. Isaiah wants God to burst through the clouds, come down from heaven and enter the scene and act! Paraphrased, he's saying *"Do something, God! Enter into our arena! Shake things up! Make Yourself known! Fix this crazy world!"* Who here hasn't prayed a similar prayer at some time in our lives? Especially this year! The prophet goes on to acknowledge there really is no other God in all of human history, a God who is real and actually responds and works for those who wait for Him. God is a god *"... who acts on behalf of those who gladly do right, who remember Your ways."* But the problem is the people had long ago *stopped* "gladly doing what is right," the people sinned against His ways; they had no longer sought after nor cared about God and His ways. Isaiah uses vivid imagery to describe the state the people are in: *"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags (as if to say their good deeds are so mixed with impure motives that they are stained like dirty rags). We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on Your name or strives to lay hold of You."* The people of Israel had ignored God, and they are now realizing what this had cost them.

Then in verse 8, we have this wonderful three-letter word: **"Yet."** A word, by the way, that is really at the core of all biblical theology. Things are never as dark as they seem, because of the divine "Yet" of God's grace and power. Says the prophet, *"YET, O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord, do not remember our sins forever. Look upon us, we pray, for we are Your people."* This is the "YET" proclaiming that because of God's grace there is always **hope**, hope that pierces the darkest of the realities about us. That's what this prophet's yearning for God to come down is all about. It's about praying and believing that God can and will graciously and powerfully enter into the arena where our earthly lives are played out and ultimately do something about the situation we're in! It's about expressing belief and confidence that this is God's world and we are God's people, no matter what! In spite of our leaving God behind and turning to our own ways, the prophet declares *"YET we are still God's people and God is still our God."* In this lament the prophet expresses Israel's repentance; the people are turning back to God and His ways, and he now gives voice to the Hope that God will come to His people. Which, by the way, is the Hope of Advent.

We celebrate that hope today; the hope that was partially fulfilled as God came to His people again and again in divine intervention, the hope that was mightily (*but still partially*) fulfilled when God came to His people in the flesh in the first arrival of Emmanuel, God in the flesh, and the hope that will be *completely* fulfilled one day when He will tear heaven completely open and burst through the clouds to enter this world in all His divine glory and majesty as promised in our Gospel passage. During Advent we remember Christ has come, and Christ will come again. That second part is not so much a threat of judgment as it is an encouraging consolation ... it is the joyful and certain hope and guarantee echoed by Paul in our reading from Corinthians that God will indeed finish what He started, He will bring to completion the salvation and redemption of this world He so loved so much that He entered into this earthly arena in the person of His only Son. We can bank on this: God will finish what He started; that is true for you and it is true for all creation.

As we are about to affirm in the words of the Scots Confession, at the core of the Christian faith is the assertion that Jesus, this true Son of the Divine, the real Prince of Peace, this Exalted One, is indeed God in the Flesh, Emmanuel, God With Us. We talk about God sending Jesus into our world, but it might be a bit clearer to say that *God Himself came to us in Jesus*. As John tells us in words we'll read later this season, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us; we have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth."* Full of grace and truth. Because we need Grace; we need forgiveness and a fresh start. And we also need Truth; we need to be guided and taught as to how to live well, how to live fully, how to live as God designed us to live. We need Grace, we need Truth; we need Jesus ... the true Son of the Divine, the true Prince of Peace, the true Augustus, Exalted One, the God in the flesh Who, full of Grace and Truth, enters into the arena of our lives to give us life abundant and eternal.

Let us stand to affirm our incarnational faith in the words of the Scots Confession (*chapters 6 and 7*):

WHEN THE FULLNESS OF TIME CAME GOD SENT HIS SON, HIS ETERNAL WISDOM, THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS OWN GLORY, INTO THIS WORLD, WHO TOOK THE NATURE OF HUMANITY FROM THE SUBSTANCE OF A WOMAN, A VIRGIN, BY MEANS OF THE HOLY GHOST. AND SO WAS BORN THE "JUST SEED OF DAVID," THE "ANGEL OF THE GREAT COUNSEL OF GOD," THE VERY MESSIAH PROMISED, WHOM WE CONFESS AND ACKNOWLEDGE TO BE EMMANUEL, TRUE GOD AND TRUE MAN, TWO PERFECT NATURES UNITED AND JOINED IN ONE PERSON. WE ACKNOWLEDGE AND CONFESS THAT THIS WONDERFUL UNION BETWEEN THE GODHEAD AND THE HUMANITY IN CHRIST JESUS DID ARISE FROM THE ETERNAL AND IMMUTABLE DECREE OF GOD FROM WHICH ALL OUR SALVATION SPRINGS AND DEPENDS.