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St. James Cathedral
1st Sunday of Advent – Year C
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A few years ago I was visiting a Carmelite priest, who for many years had run the Institute of Spirituality in Stanwood. I made the comment to him that all of his retreats seemed to have the same message; God is love. Without missing a beat, he shot back at me in his lilting Irish brogue, “As soon as you get that one down we’ll move on to lesson two.” I can’t help but think of his remark as we begin the Season of Advent; again. Hearing the same collection of scripture readings; again. Singing those same familiar hymns; again. We prepare shopping lists; wrap presents; send cards; all with an ease that comes from repeating the ritual year after year. We have memorized lines from Christmas pageants; sing carols by heart and move effortlessly between holy space to marketplace and back again. We have become skilled veterans of the Advent season.

And yet, year after year, our liturgy brings us back again to the same place where we once again hope to shake off everything that is rote and routine, to wake up to the promise of a new day; to hear the message again; Christ is coming. It is through our belief in Jesus’ coming that the year-to-year cycle of routine repetition is broken, and our lives can be seen for what they truly are; not endlessly cyclical, but a linear movement progressing from a beginning to an end, all of which originates in, and is bounded by God’s love.

To help prepare us, our readings during Advent present us with stories of heralds proclaiming the message of Christ’s coming; we will read words from Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, St. Paul, and in today’s gospel, Jesus heralds his own coming. Each reading is chosen to bring us hope in God’s love and promise that Christ is coming.

In our first reading Jeremiah reminds us that God’s promises will never go unfulfilled. Advent is the season of anticipation. Anticipation of God speaking a

new word of hope, life and forgiveness; that word is Jesus and Christ is coming. Written during a time of great tribulation, Jeremiah encourages the people of Judah and Israel to stand firm in their hope. With great anticipation he proclaims the message to a beleaguered people in exile that God will raise up a shoot from Jesse's stump. From the old stalk of David a new shoot, the messiah will bud; Christ is coming.

While Jeremiah's message was to a people awaiting the first coming of the messiah, Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was written to people anticipating the second coming of the messiah, which of course includes us. Written just twenty years after Christ's death and resurrection, many people expected to see Jesus return in their lifetime. So Paul, brimming with desire, endeavors to strengthen their resolve by praying that the Lord increase them with an overflowing love and a strengthened heart so that they, so that we, may be found blameless before God when Christ comes.

And Christ is coming! We heard his promise proclaimed in St. Luke's gospel today. Using very dramatic, apocalyptic language, Jesus tells us that he will return and his coming will be heralded by the sun, moon and stars, by the earth and seas. Christ is coming, descending on a cloud. It's a great story with very vivid imagery that has provided fertile ground for many books and movies. But Christ is not encouraging us to spend our time looking to the heavens trying to interpret the signs in the sky; instead, we are encouraged to experience the signs within us. Many of us have already experienced the sun and stars fading from our lives and disappearing at the death of a loved one or a tragedy that has overwhelmed us. It is easy for us to be dismayed and discouraged as we look at the poverty, wars and evil that threatens our world. Fear of the future motivates many to seek to end their own lives, such as the 51 people who have already sought lethal prescriptions under our states euthanasia law, or the millions of unborn that are aborted for fear of the future impact upon the parents.

The signs of Christ's coming are all around us, we see them and experience them every day. Like Jeremiah in his day, Jesus encourages us to

stand firm against these disorders and tribulations, to kneel in the poverty of our own truth which will become the richness of his coming.

But when will he come to establish his kingdom? Will it be in 2012 as the new movie predicts will be the end of the world? Will it be tomorrow, or possibly today? Jesus said only the Father knows. And yet, the church has always held a good idea of when Christ's coming will happen; it's about ten minutes from now. When we, along with the heavenly hosts proclaim; "Holy, holy, holy ...Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," then kneeling we await His arrival. The heavens open and Christ will descend upon our altar to dwell among us under the sign of bread and wine. For wherever you find the King, there you find his kingdom; and wherever you find the Eucharist, there you find the King.

My friends, the more I think about it, the more I realize that my Carmelite friend is right; we keep coming back, over and over again to learn the same lesson before we move onto the next. I would add however, that there really is only one lesson we need to learn, God is Love. And because of God's love, Christ came as a child born in a manger. Through God's love, Christ comes and establishes His kingdom on our altars. And for the fulfillment of God's love, we wait in joyful hope, for Christ is coming!