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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Third Sunday of Advent (Year C) / December 15, 2024
Luke 3:8-17

The Good News of Judgement

For as long as I can remember, I have had a fascination with borders. Several years ago, I took a detour through Canada to visit the Haskell Library and Opera House, a historic building that sits directly atop the border between Derby, Vermont, and Stanstead, Quebec. I memorialized this trip with a photo of my feet straddling a thick line of black tape: one foot planted firmly in the United States and the other in Canada. This curious building shares something in common with the liturgical season of Advent. More than any season in the Church Year, Advent reminds us that the Church lives on a border. A border between two ages. The age of Christ's first coming and his second. The age of his Kingdom's *inauguration*, and the age of its *consummation*. The Church carries out her mission on this border, between the Kingdom that is both *already* here and *not yet* fully realized. Our lives as people of faith are lived in this tension between the "already" and the "not yet."

Advent is also my favorite season of the Church Year, which is why it bothers me that it's so frequently misunderstood. Far too often, Advent is reduced to a season of preparation for Christmas. A time to prepare for the first coming of Jesus. And next Sunday, on the final Sunday of Advent, we do get a little of that. But if we look carefully at our Advent collects, readings and hymns, we'll discover very little that points us to the

Jesus of Bethlehem. Instead, we are pointed to the Jesus who “will come again to judge the living and the dead.”¹

When we pray over the bread and wine in Advent, we pray that “we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold [Christ’s] appearing...when he comes again...to judge the world.”² This theme also recurs throughout our Advent hymnody: “Lo! He comes with clouds descending!” The Introit that begins each of our Advent services: “...lo, I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth.” And my favorite example, our Advent Song of Praise, “People look East!” Friends, do you know why the People look east? It’s because, throughout the ages, East is the cardinal direction that has been associated with the Messiah’s return. It’s why churches, like Trinity, are built on an east-facing axis. Our posture in this worship service anticipates the second coming of Christ.

Then today, once again, we meet the chief spokesman of Advent: John the Baptist. The prophet who straddles the border between the Old and New Covenants. This prophet has but one solitary purpose – to point us to Jesus. And the Jesus he points to is not the docile infant of the manger, but the triumphant Judge who comes with winnowing fork in hand to separate the “wheat from the chaff...with unquenchable fire.” It’s no wonder Hallmark does not have an Advent section! Can you imagine a true-to-scripture Advent card? Camel-hair clad, locust-eating John the Baptist on the front, and a greeting inside that reads: “Happy Advent, you brood of vipers!”

Advent is not for the faint of heart, so it’s no surprise the world starts singing Christmas carols the day after Thanksgiving and skips right over Advent. But as Advent-

¹ From the Nicene Creed, which is professed immediately following the Sermon in the Prayer Book’s liturgy of Holy Eucharist.

² From the Proper Preface appointed for use in Advent in the Prayer Book’s Eucharistic Prayers.

keeping Christians, we cannot rush to Bethlehem. We cannot ignore John, or his preaching, or the second coming of Christ. I don't want to make light of the discomfort many of us feel about Judgement Day and the second coming of Christ. As a child of the Bible Belt South, I know first-hand how this doctrine been co-opted by certain religious groups to deeply troubling ends. Sadly, they rely on a fear-based, fire-and-brimstone message to bring people to so-called "conversion." But the solution for us is not to *relinquish* the doctrine of the second coming. Rather we should *reclaim* it as the hopeful promise of restored creation that it truly is. Make no mistake: Judgement Day is a fundamental part of the Good News of the Gospel.

Many of us struggle to see this, though, because we bristle at the word "judgment." The writer Debie Thomas argues that's because we misconstrue the meaning of judgement. In a commentary on today's gospel, Thomas writes that, "We tend to equate judgement with condemnation, but in fact, to judge something is to see it clearly."³ And my favorite Advent preacher Fleming Rutledge reminds us that in Advent, we look clearly into the darkness. In her preaching and writing, over and over Rutledge intones this refrain: "Advent begins in the dark."⁴ By this she means that before we embrace the light and joy of Christmas, we are to confront the world's darkness. In Advent, we look without flinching at the problem of evil in our world. The wreckage of war. The tyranny of greed. The intractable systems of oppression we are bound up in. What Christians call "sin."

³ Debie Thomas, "What Then Should We Do?" Journey with Jesus, December 9, 2018. <https://journeywithjesus.dev/essays/2030-what-then-should-we-do>.

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 251.

By confronting the darkness, we are set free from the delusion that we humans can extricate ourselves from the sin that enslaves us. Indeed, a clear-eyed look into the darkness reveals this undeniable truth: our world stands in need of judgement. But my beloved, the good news of Advent is that God does not leave us mired in our sin. Our deliverance is at hand! God's rescue operation is underway! The Just and Righteous Judge has come and will come again to set things right. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again at the last day *to make all things new*.

And from the banks of the Jordan River, John the Baptist announces this morning that the Deliverer we await comes wielding fire. And while fire can be painful and destructive – something to reasonably fear – fire can also be wonderfully good, as we see throughout scripture. Do not forget that God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. The Holy Spirit alighted as flames of fire on the disciples at Pentecost. Fire has the power to refine. It melts away impurities, revealing what is good, what is true, what is holy.

And so, my resolute Advent-keeping friends, we hold our east-ward gaze as we await the Savior who is coming. But our waiting comes with instructions. The Baptist exhorts us this morning to bear fruits worthy of repentance. And he is clear about what this means: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." At Trinity Church, our many Outreach & Justice ministries help us to bear these very fruits. In just one small example, this coming Saturday, we will return to Rosie's Place, the women's shelter in the South End, to prepare and serve a meal to those suffering the fruits of an unjust housing system. In three hours on an Advent afternoon, we will not solve the problem of homelessness, but

we will live ever so slightly into God's dream of restored creation. Pointing with our lips, our hearts, and our lives, to the Kingdom that is to come.

People of Trinity Church, prepare your hearts and minds once again to receive our Lord Jesus Christ. On this border between two ages, hear the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, to bear fruits worthy of repentance. Come to this table that sits on the border between heaven and earth to receive holy food. Then go into the world to be light in the darkness, confident that the One who came to us in great humility, will one day come again in power and great glory. Amen.