

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
November 27, 2011 – Advent I
Mark 13:24-37
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

In the Episcopal Church over the last number of years our approach to Advent has shifted. Advent used to be regarded as a “little Lent,” a time of penitence and fasting before the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas. That’s why we use purple vestments and hangings, as we do in Lent. On the four Sundays of Advent priests often preached a series of sermons on what were called “The Four Last Things:” death, judgment, hell, and heaven. At least the last Sunday before Christmas focused on heaven!

Now we place less emphasis on penitence and more on joyful expectation as we prepare for our celebration of Christ’s birth. You wouldn’t know that from today’s lessons, but this shift is in process. In churches that own blue vestments and hangings, those are used instead of purple, blue being the color traditionally associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Some people find deep spiritual meaning in this season through meditation on the pregnant mother of Jesus, quietly pondering, with her, the meaning of his miraculous birth. We light candles on the Advent Wreath and emphasize the light of Christ coming into the world.

The emphasis has shifted, but not entirely. We omit singing the Gloria during Advent. We sing Advent hymns, not Christmas hymns. Here at St. Giles’ we take down our banners until Christmas Eve. These features of our worship reflect our awareness that preparing for the coming of Jesus is a serious matter. It is appropriate to prayerfully examine how ready we are for Jesus’ arrival. And honest examination will reveal some work to be done. In the words of the collect for the first Sunday of Advent, “Almighty

God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.”

The prayer assumes that there is work for each of us to do, changes to be made. This is a time to wake up, take an honest look at the dark places of our lives, choose to cast away the works of darkness – in our behavior, our minds, our hearts – and finally, to put on the armor of light, to deliberately strengthen ourselves with Christ’s light as we battle with the darkness.

This may be the most challenging season of the year for a serious Christian living in our culture. We know from the record of the Bible and from our knowledge of the history of the church that there are always dangers for faithful people living in the world. Groups separate themselves from the world in order to protect themselves from the danger of having their values and lives corrupted by the values of the world. In the 17th chapter of the gospel of John we find a prayer of Jesus to the Father. Jesus prays clearly about how his followers do not belong to the world, but being in the world, they are in danger and need God’s protection against “the evil one.” St. Paul warned the Christians in the church in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2). This is the perfect time to remind ourselves of this warning.

In the world Christmas has been taken over as a secular consumer event. We are tempted on all sides to spend money – to get into debt, if necessary – to celebrate and to show others how much we love them by how much we spend. The music we hear in the stores lures us into fantasyland. The advertisements we see suggest a model of life that is beyond the reach of most people, especially in these difficult economic times. This season is a good example of how Christians living in the world are tempted to conform to the world and thereby lose focus on what is most important.

When the culture we live in promotes what is false and what hurts and exploits people, the church is and should be deeply countercultural. So I think that Advent is a good time for us to take a serious look at how we are preparing for our celebration of the birth of Jesus. I am not suggesting that we completely reject the more secular aspects of Christmas. What I am suggesting is that we “hold fast to that which is good” about Christmas celebrations and traditions and resist and reject what is false and harmful.

We are preparing for the birth of the Prince of Peace. Can you imagine living during the next four weeks so that on December 24th or December 25th you can come to church in deep peace of mind and soul, ready to attend to the saving mystery of Christ’s birth? My experience of faithful Christians over the years teaches me that most of us get so caught up in activities and preparations, in busyness of all kinds that peace is far from us by the time Christmas comes. If you regularly do too much in this season, how might you simplify your preparations? Stop and think before the rush begins.

It is good to express our love for one another at Christmas, and exchanging gifts is often part of that expression of love. But think for a moment about how you do that. Are you spending more than you can afford? Are you buying things for people that they don’t need, maybe even don’t want, just to have something to give them? Would it be a good idea to talk to some of your co-workers, friends and family members and suggest that you give each other less or stop exchanging gifts?

Think about where your money is going. Can you purchase gifts that benefit others – for example, items for sale next Sunday at our table at the Jefferson Fire House to support the Community Energy Fund, or items made by local people working to support themselves, or gifts from groups like the Rotary who have fundraising sales at

this time of year? Perhaps you might give one of the Gifts for Life from Episcopal Relief and Development – a goat or food for young school children or a mosquito net to prevent malaria. Spend your money to promote the well-being of others as best you can.

Consider giving gifts that don't cost money, gifts of your time such as an offer to take someone shopping, or shovel their walk, or bring them a meal to share in January.

And think carefully about how you spend your time. Plan ahead and don't let yourself be so busy that you become exhausted and frantic. Socializing and entertaining at this season can be good activities, opportunities for people to enjoy one another's company and grow in their relationships. But think about how you do that. Are you spending time with the people who mean most to you? Are there invitations you might say "no" to? As you prepare to entertain friends and family, can you simplify to conserve your energy and good will? Do you need to do everything you have always done?

Our church year focuses on Jesus, from the first Sunday of Advent to the last Sunday of the church year when we celebrate Christ the King. During this season of Advent keep in mind the one whose birth we will celebrate – a poor infant sheltered in a stable, of no account to people of power, but adored by Mary and Joseph, simple shepherds, and the angels of heaven. And remember Christ the King who, we learned last week, will judge us on the basis of how we have compassionately relieved the suffering of those in need, and thus served him. Let this be a season when we help the poor, visit the sick, reach out to the lonely, offer forgiveness and healing, and spread the love of Christ. The world will pull us away if it can, but with God's help and in company with one another, I believe that each of us can spend a holy and prayerful Advent and come to Christmas full of love for God, one another, and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.