

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we begin our four-week journey we know as Advent that takes us to the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord and the Twelve Days of Christmas. During these four weeks of the season of Advent we take time to reflect and discern the coming of Jesus Christ our Messiah. When discerning the coming of Christ, I'm sure you all know, or you have heard that the origin of the term "advent" is from the Latin word *adventus*, which simply translates as "coming" or "arrival."

It is also a time when we move from darkness into light as represented on the Advent Wreath. We light the candles to signify the coming of our Savior. As more light radiates each week, we move closer to the birth of the Christ Child who will be the light of the world. The progression of light from these four candles that represent hope, peace, joy, and love, in the expectation surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead.

So today we begin Advent in the cold darkness of the culture and light our first candle of hope in anticipation of His coming. This seems too also be true of our Gospel lesson. The appointed text seems to take us into the ambiguity of eschatological darkness, in that we find Jesus telling us about the very beginning of the end of time on the very First Week of Advent. But its really not this way if we look past the constraints of the lectionary boundaries and look at the start of the 13th chapter of the Gospel lesson rather than the very end of it such as we have before us in today's Gospel lesson. In the opening verses of this chapter, we hear Jesus telling of the destruction of the temple. We hear Jesus ask and explain to Peter, James, John, and Andrew:

'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' (Mark 13:2)

Jesus continues to say to them:

Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. (Mark 13:5b-6)

And after all has been destroyed in the proclamation that Jesus is sharing with Peter, James, John, and Andrew, our Gospel lesson appointed for today picks up with:

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

(Mark 13:24-27)

Then Jesus warns Peter, James, John, and Andrew, and us to "beware, keep watch." The Greek term Mark uses gets translated every time he uses it with the English term, "watch", except in this passage, it is translated in the English with awake but it can also mean, be alert, be alive, or just simply be. Translated out Jesus could be saying to them and us, be alert, be alive, BE your faith...BE Christian, don't be "A" Christian, BE Christian. We know all about being "A" Christian or HOW to be "A" Christian, but Jesus seems to be saying to us to simply BE Christian, let your faith be alive...let your faith be active... may it be alert and vigorous.

Herein lies the problem...we become zealous to point of becoming zealots about our faith and that faith is built to our specifications...built on our judgments our likes and dislikes that says who's in and who's out...who's chosen and who is NOT eligible for God's salvation. In other words...our faith that is built on our understandings become the magnificent building or temple that we adore and it becomes something that allows only those we accept and keeps the others we don't like...out.

Maybe, just maybe this scenario is just a bit much for some, but ask yourself, what temple have I built that casts a shadow on my faith, gets in the way of faith, or even becomes my faith? What temple have I built that causes me to deny my faith at times, to doubt my faith at times, to ignore it, or to simply just forget about it? Here is the darkness where I think we all sit at times...things we build from what we discern to be the magnificence cast shadows and darkness over our faith. While the temples we build within ourselves may not have the physical appearance or stature of the great temples built with human hands, they are however much more difficult to tear down and much more destructive to faith.

But we learn today that the birth of the one who is to come will chase out the factors in our life that cause us to build the temples within ourselves. In the Gospel of John, we learn about God through Jesus. According to John's understanding of who Jesus is, we learn that whatever Jesus teaches us about himself he is revealing God to us in a human understanding. And from the Gospel of John, we hear this:

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' ¹⁹Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' ²⁰The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:13-22)

Some of our temples have been under construction for more than forty-six years, some of us continue to construct our temples within ourselves. Nonetheless, the cattle, the sheep, and the doves, along with the money-changers are things that represent all the functioning things we place into the temples we build within ourselves that darken or distract us from God and hinder our faith from being active or alive.

The darkness of this eschatological Gospel lesson and the destruction of the temple is not going to be the darkness we are left to sit in...there is Good News, there is hope, and there is light just as sure as the fig tree shows us the coming of summer and the coming of the fruit of that tree. So, today we light our one candle of hope that shines a light in the darkness of our lives and

within our self-made temples. And in that darkness our Lord Jesus Christ enters in not with the power and might of stature and physical presence, but with hope found in a vulnerable baby.

As Jesus tells us to be alert, to be alive, to watch out, or keep awake he is telling us to be active in our faith...and by being active Jesus is not telling us to go out and point out the faults of others. Being active, being alive in our faith is being grace, being understanding and care, being merciful and forgiving in the darkness of our world today. Being active in our faith is giving our faith dominion over the darkness of the temples we construct and continue to construct.

The child whose birth we anticipate does not come to seize dominion with violence or war but comes to be grace and mercy for our fallen world, he comes to suffer with us, he comes to be that light and hope that breaks that hopeless darkness. Jesus Christ is the light of hope that no darkness can overcome and it is the light of grace and mercy we share. St. Paul reminds the church in Corinth and us of this very thing:

⁶For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

¹⁴because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

(2 Corinthians 4:6-7, 11, 14-15)

I don't know if I will be one of the elect according to our Gospel today, nor can I tell you that you will be either, but I can say this, we have been gathered today NOT from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven, but from the surrounding communities and neighborhoods and Jesus Christ is here with us...giving to us light in the darkness of our lives and giving us hope, giving us mercy, giving us forgiveness in the promise of new life found in this Holy Word, giving us his very presence in his body and blood given in this Holy Meal.

Amid the darkness of this eschatological Gospel lesson and amid the darkness of our hidden temples...we light one candle, the First Candle of hope. May the light of his very presence be made more radiant as we go from here to share that light of hope and mercy in the darkness of this world. May the light of Christ's grace, be the light we extend to more and more people so we may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.