



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church

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Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
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**A**DVENT IS A MYSTERIOUS SEASON. It has always been a rather somber, quiet season in the church year, during which the church prepared itself to celebrate the grace and mystery of the Incarnation, God's gift of himself to the world in the person of Jesus Christ. So the lessons, the hymns, the prayers, even the liturgical color purple, are somber, pointing us inward, making us quiet, reflective, and waiting.

But nowadays I find the mystery deepens when contrasted with the cacophony of the American holiday season. Now, this is not a sermon that is going to rail against the commercialization of Christmas. We all know it's out there, and we all participate, to one extent or another. And a lot of it is quite fun, isn't it? But we are lucky, too, that at least once a week we have this quiet, reflective time to turn inward and ponder the mystery that is at the burning center of all this holiday celebration.

As I've said the Daily Office the past two weeks and done my sermon preparation for today, I've been struck by what all the Scripture readings for Advent emphasize. They, of course, point to the event of the Incarnation; not the baby in the manger part, which is really only a tiny fraction of the story, but God coming

among us for our sake. That is profound enough, but the lessons also point to an event beyond the Incarnation, an event we call the Second Coming.

Episcopalians don't talk much about the Second Coming. It is certainly part of our creed: we recite every week, in the Nicene Creed, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." But we don't really probe too hard at what that means. Yet it is a fundamental article of faith, and one that we inherit from the earliest Christians. Paul mentions it in passing in today's Epistle: "so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless..." That's just a little throwaway comment, but if you begin to look, you'll find mentions of the Second Coming all throughout Paul's writings. The gospels also anticipate it. It's even the entire subject of the Book of Revelation. The early Christians had a special greeting that presumed it. They said to each other, "Maranatha!", an Aramaic phrase that means, "Come, O Lord!" What is this belief, and why do we emphasize it in Advent?

You may be thinking, uh-oh, I've heard about churches that talk about this all the time. They're the ones with the bumper stickers on their cars that say, Caution! In case of rapture, this car will be driverless! Well, yes. There are churches and denominations that put a lot of emphasis on the Second Coming, and they have a very specific set of beliefs about it called premillennial dispensationalism. These beliefs include the idea that at the end of history God has planned a preordained set of events, in a specific order. The minions of Satan, including the anti-Christ, will become the world rulers. The true Christians will be taken up to heaven in the rapture, but everyone else will undergo terrible suffering. At the end of this period

of suffering, called the tribulation, Jesus will come again, the dead will be resurrected, everyone will be judged, everyone except the true Christians will be sent to the eternal fires of hell, and then Christ will reign forever. It is a gruesome, violent, revenge-filled fantasy, and I don't think it has anything to do with the true nature of God as incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Rather, let's pay some attention to the symbols the Scripture uses to talk about the Second Coming. We are admonished many times to look east, to the dawn, to Jesus coming like the sun rises on the world. A very positive image. Another motif that recurs is the rough ways being made smooth- this is an image that first appears in Isaiah 40:1-11, and this morning we heard it repeated, in Baruch and again in Luke. The image of light repeats constantly. The theme of joy is heard again and again. "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem... for God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory," says Baruch. And finally, an inclusive note resounds, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." These images and themes are much more in keeping with what we know of God as we encounter God in the Scripture, in prayer, and in the breaking of the bread. Jesus is not waiting in the wings, like some heavenly Terminator, to appear and start vaporizing people. How blasphemous that idea is! God became incarnate in Jesus because God loves us. God wants us to come to him; God wants us to dwell with Him in everlasting light. In the Second Coming, God in Christ will finally set the world right, the world that we have screwed up so badly. No more war, no more violence, no more disease, hunger, or suffering. I don't know about you, but it sounds good to me. No wonder the early Christians were anxious for it.

The next questions are, "How will this happen?" And "When will this happen?" And the answers? We don't know. We really don't even have a clue. It's in God's hands, and, frankly, it is none of our business. We are called to live now, in the present, and not waste our all-too-brief lives on futile speculation about how and when the Second Coming will occur. So my counsel is that we should return to our usual practice of not thinking too hard about the Second Coming. Instead, we should live out the life God has called us to, in faith and hope that we can be little beacons of light in the present darkness. But every once in awhile, when the going gets rough, we can remember that the fate of the world is ultimately in God's hands, and we can say with the early Christians, Maranatha! Come, O Lord!