“Advent Words – Advent and Salvation”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

My friend Alfredo grew up and still lives in Northern New Mexico. I met him there in 1993 when I first began studying on the campus of St. John’s College in Santa Fe. As the small world turns, I married Alfredo’s partner as assistants to the director of the Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury’s graduate school of English, which rented space at St. John’s for several decades. I call this small world, because my classmate Amy Schroth of Sedgwick married Alfredo. We’ve been friends since. You don’t need all this background to know that I understood the best word for Advent from Alfredo. One of the beautiful features of the New Mexico landscape is the combination of an arid landscape, very tall mountains, and changing seasons not too different from ours apart from the foliage. In the spring, creek and river beds called arroyos, which had dried completely in the summer and into the fall, are filled with the running water from the snow melt. We are familiar here with the sound of the clear water running over little waterfalls in places like Peter’s Brook. It happens gradually, and the soil turns into squishy dark mud on trails and through the woods.

It’s different in Santa Fe and in Nambe, where Alfredo’s original family lives. It is to these arroyos that Alfredo knows to wait and watch for what is called La Venida—*the coming* of the torrent of water when, in far more sudden fashion, the streams and rivers fill. It can be dangerous if you don’t know to expect it. La Venida is known to take out 4-wheel drive vehicles out for a backroad jaunt and, sadly, hikers who don’t know how to recognize the sound. For those who know, though, like Alfredo when he taught first his daughter Amanda and later Mabel and Peter, lying down on an outcrop of rock above the dry arroyo, it is possible to see all the power of La Venida without the danger. Ready and waiting, they experience the awe of the spring rush of such a volume of water, with destruction in its path. Later, though, and certainly by the time I would arrive in late June each year, the arroyos would be full of the blue-green sage and other plants both fragrant and appealing. La Venida is a purge and an awakening.

I have never seen La Venida, but I have known her smaller children of sorts. Nearly every afternoon there is a kind of a monsoon after the clouds roll into the dark blue sky. The dry beds are moistened, with sometimes even moving water. I know to look for them and I would go to smell the ground awaken. You probably know your own smells here that remind you there will always be change. That’s the way it is with La Venida. That’s the way it is with Advent. We get little glimpses of God breaking into our lives with good and with promises of what is even better. Sometimes, too, we know the power life can bring, and we aren’t quite sure where it is that we may lie down in safety, either to watch or to prepare ourselves to help others who may be swept away.

I am sure that there isn’t one among us who doesn’t know that we often need to be borne up to deal with life. That is reality number one. There is much that can bring us down, and we need help to be brought up. We need help to be borne up—again, and again, and again. This is Advent, and we are waiting for something very special. This is Advent, and we are watching, looking around the corner it seems, for something that will help us to bear up under what Shakespeare calls “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” This is the second Sunday of Advent, and we are reminded of three central ideas in our scripture lessons. God loves us and wants very much to comfort us. God gives this message to his prophets as recorded in Isaiah and in Mark. God also wants us to be ready when comfort arrives in the form of his Son, our savior Jesus. God tells us in no uncertain terms how to be ready. “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”

I know that the idea of a savior, or even the word salvation as it has come to be used in the Christian church can be difficult for people. To say that “Jesus saves” has some of us cringing to remember when someone may have asked, “are you saved,” with a very human sense of judgment or even simple criticism if they believe you have not “been saved” according to their definition of espousing certain *beliefs*. I will tell you what I believe saves us: indiscriminate love as Jesus modeled for us. When we love first and ask questions later—or never; when we forgive without wondering whether a wrong has been made right by some *human* standard, we make ourselves right with God.

John the Baptist called upon those who followed him to make ready for him who would be even greater; he baptized them, and they confessed their sins. We watch and we wait for Jesus’ coming, hoping that we *will* be found spotless in God’s eyes, don’t we? Our hope rests not only in joy today, but in the promise of eternal joy, but we may sometimes be afraid of what our lives will reveal. Today isn’t a bad day to think about it, as we peer around the corner to see whether Christmas will bring a Christ who loves us so much that he wants us to be our very best selves; as we watch to see in what way Jesus will be revealed to us today.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.” These words are still our comfort today. It is said that each Sunday is like a little Easter; like a small celebration of what we believe about the Resurrection. For me this week, I find myself thinking of each Sunday also like a little Christmas. We can spend each week preparing for Christ’s arrival and waiting and watching to see where we might find him; where we might find the comfort that saves us.

We are here this morning because each one of us believes in our deepest places that Jesus *is alive* already and still, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We do not need to be afraid; we do not have to let each of today’s woes bring us down. Jesus tells us that he came to fulfill the promises made to God’s people. This means you. This means us, in the comfort of God’s gathered people. It is *this day* that in anticipation of Jesus’ birth we can wait and watch for Jesus’ presence in the Church that is Jesus’ body. Remember, though, that we celebrate the good news that we can be borne up again, whether you call it resurrection or the new life that rises up after the sweeping away of *la venida*. Because of Jesus our sins are forgiven, and we are right with God. The rough places have been made plain and we are invited to make them straight and smooth for our neighbors, meaning all who are placed in our path.

“So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.” It has been a tradition since the early church that prior to sharing in the Lord’s Supper, God’s people would first reconcile themselves to each other, confessing anything that might keep them from unity in Christ. I have missed sharing this peace of Christ, and I invite you now to do so now. Turn to your neighbor, offering them Christ’s peace whether in the form of a handshake or just a smile. “May the peace of Christ be with you.”