

*Sermon for 1 Advent, Year A
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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Today is New Year's day. Last week, we celebrated the culmination of our year when we praised our Lord in his glory as the king over all creation. This week, we set ourselves once again to prepare for the celebration of His incarnation, the coming of that glorious king as a tiny baby, as one of us. The advent vestments remind us that Christmas is coming. We all like Christmas. Just the thought of Christmas this close gives us a warm, comfortable feeling. Like sharing a warm cup of cocoa with your favorite person in front of a blazing fire.

There's nothing particularly wrong with that. But the lessons this morning have a different message. It's this: Wake up! Put your armor on. Prepare for battle.

In Advent, we don't just prepare ourselves for the celebration of Christmas. We prepare ourselves for Jesus coming again in glory. We prepare ourselves to meet Him when He comes to judge both the quick and the dead. And we prepare ourselves for His reign, which will never end. The passage from Isaiah this morning tells us of the wonderful peace that will follow the judgment. When "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" and there will be no more war. But that is a vision of the future, meant to encourage us for the fight. Today: Wake up! Put on your armor. Prepare for battle.

In St. Matthew's gospel, Our Lord warns us to be watchful, because we do not know when he is coming. The only assurance he gives us is that it will be a surprise. You must be ready; "for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect." Once the Son of man has come and cleaned house, there will be peace. In the meantime, you had better get ready. Wake up! Put on your armor. Prepare for battle.

So what do I mean by this? What battle am I talking about? I am not talking about our nation's war against terrorism, although that battle would be easy if we first won this one. I am not even talking about the battle for God's truth within the Church, although that would also be a cinch if we first put this one to rest. I am talking about the battle of love.

We too often think of love as a vague sense of affection. Love is a warm, comfortable word, which we would probably all include in that scene with the cocoa in front of the fire. That's all well and good. But St. Paul reminds us, in Romans 13, that love is a far more serious matter. "Love is the fulfilling of the law."

Our society and especially our churches often repeat “love” as an ambiguous mantra that magically allows them to escape moral responsibility. As in, “I don’t have to remain chaste as long as I love her.” As if chastity were not a part of love. That sort of thinking has nothing to do with what St. Paul is talking about. Notice he says that the “commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ ... are summed up in this sentence, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” This commandment does not supplant the others. It simply summarizes them.

This commandment makes our job simpler, but harder. Simpler, because we don’t have to worry as much about where to draw the line. Harder, because it raises the bar infinitely high. “Love does no wrong”, either by commission or by omission. If I do wrong to my neighbor, then I have failed morally. Full stop. The standard to which we are called is the perfection of our Lord, who did no wrong to anyone. We are called to deny ourselves for the sake of others, putting their welfare before ours.

By now you are probably thinking, “But that’s impossible. We simply aren’t perfect. There’s no way that we can do that.” And you are right. We can’t even begin to grow toward perfection without God. But with him, we can make a start. We can begin this great struggle. That is why I call you to the Battle of Love. St. Paul is speaking to believers in Rome when he says, “It is time for you to wake from sleep. ... Cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Wake up! Put on your armor. Prepare for battle.

“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” The reason we do not love is that we do not struggle enough against our own flesh. I am not speaking here simply of physical desires, but of that whole part of ourselves that wants more than anything else to satisfy all of *our* desires before anything else. The list of vices that St. Paul gives us in our reading all have to do with a lack of vigilance over that fleshly part of ourselves. Reveling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness are perhaps obviously fleshly pursuits. But quarreling and jealousy are just as fleshly. We are jealous and quarrel with one another when we are not working at loving one another, when we are concentrating all our energy on pleasing ourselves, rather than caring for each other.

If we are honest, we will admit that that is our natural state. When I let my guard down, when I relax my moral watchfulness, that’s when I am bound to get peeved with Jenny for asking me to take out the trash, or for asking me to give the girls their baths, or for leaving the top off the toothpaste tube, or for whatever stupid little thing it is that I don’t want to have to deal with. You get the picture. I have to remain in constant vigilance over my own fleshly desires, so as not to make provision for them. Otherwise, I will always revert.

But as I maintain that vigilance over my sinful flesh, I am constantly being remade in the image of my Lord. As I struggle to love my wife, my children, my boss, my neighbor; to do no wrong and to care for *their* welfare; *I* get stronger. With each little daily campaign, I hone the blade of my character for the next encounter. That is the battle of love. That is the constant struggle that prepares me for the coming of the Lord. And there is no shortcut to perfection.

But “salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” The Lord is coming. And he is coming at an hour we do not expect. Wake up! Put on your armor. Prepare for battle.