

Live for...?

From an old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip comes this conversation. In the first frame Calvin speaks to Hobbes and says:

“Live for the moment is my motto. You never know how long you got.”

In the second frame he explains

“You could step into the road tomorrow and WHAM, you get hit by a cement truck! Then you'd be sorry you put off your pleasures. That's what I say - live for the moment.”

In the third frame he asks Hobbes: “What's your motto?”

Hobbes replies: “My motto is - Look down the road.”

We have begun the season of Advent—a season known for **waiting** and **wondering**. We **wait** for the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, and for the promise of his permanent reign in this world at the end of time. We **wonder** about the end times—when will that happen, what will it mean, who will be accepted into God's eternal kingdom, and how will we know.

Most likely we have mixed feelings—of apprehension and anxiety, mixed with curiosity and optimism about the future. We like the idea of Jesus coming, of a new start, but we want to cling to the world as we know and have experienced it. But, to get to the next new thing, we have to let go of some things as they have been. Jesus invites us to dream of a new beginning.

It seems difficult for us to know how to look down the road, especially when we aren't always sure what to watch out for, or what we are expecting to see. Are we looking for a bus or a marching band?

Today's Gospel passage does give us some “signs” of what might be ahead:

- signs for direction, to let us know what's happening and where we're going.
- signs for guidance, to keep us on track,
- signs for reassurance.

For us to absorb the true intention of Advent, we have to imagine and move toward a new way of being. In order to pick up a new way of being, we have to let go of some things—or at least one thing. Jesus promises to set us free from those things of this world, **because they keep us from being holy**. Now that may not sound like such a good deal. Perhaps we want to be ‘holy’ when all else is said and done—but not too soon; because if truth be told, we're not so sure we want to be holy. Maybe that's because we think of being holy as stiff upper-lipped, stern, and not having any fun. Holiness means becoming more like God. If we think that God is rigid and vindictive, then we I doubt that any of us want any part of that. But, what if we imagine God as full of joy, laughter, light, dancing, and beauty? Would we want to be like that? Would that makes us want to be more God-like? I certainly hope so.

If being **holy** is being more God-like or closer to God in thinking and action, then the opposite is also true. When we are less God-like or farther from the image God has for us, we are more focused on ourselves and the issues and cares of this world. Being focused on earthly things really means we are focused on our needs, and our concerns, and how I/we are doing. There's little time or energy to focus on others.

This will look slightly different for each of us. For some it will be that my view of the world is the right one. I have thought it out, and I know the answers to life's hardest questions. My ideas are the right ideas, and no one can tell me differently.

For some, it will be that I am anxious about what is going to happen. We divide the world into us-and-them. We are afraid that there won't be a military solution to every issue—that a show of force, while necessary, may not be enough. We are concerned about the American way of life—fearful of the changes that will be coming. We believe that the 'good old days' (whenever that was) were the golden age of our nation, and we should return to that time so that all will be well with the world.

For others, it is need to hold onto the approval and compliments of others. We feel best when we are surrounded by adoring fans. They feed us and help us know we are worthy. We then can be swayed from doing right things because they are right, to doing and saying things that get us most approval.

Fr. Peter Newsam says, "There is at the heart of every human being an emptiness, a void that is made for God, and if we do not enthrone him firmly in that place, something else always squeezes in."

Shedding the old so that we can prepare to receive the new. It is a tension that is as old as humankind. And we are ill at ease about doing so. We want everything to stay the way it is for as long as we can. Most of us dread change, look grudgingly at new ideas, new ways, new people, new traditions. Our rootedness in the now and in the past feels peaceful. But it also keeps us from accepting the new, and being ready for the inevitable. Either the world will end one day, or our lives will end first. We'd like to know when that is, so we can steel ourselves from it. We'd like to know so that then we can start becoming the person God wants us to be—that holy person.

There is a primal thrill and fascination that comes with end-of-the-world predictions. The desire to know about future events with solid assurance is also a trap. If our burning desire is to know when so that we can be prepared, we are not being faithful to the gospel. Jesus reminds that our redemption is not in the ability to know, because that desire turns the focus back on ourselves. Our call as disciples is to live daily so we can say, "Yes, I am ready to meet God today."

The story is told of a minister who waited in line to have the car filled with gas just before a long holiday weekend. The attendant worked quickly, but there were many cars ahead. Finally, the attendant motioned the minister toward a vacant pump. "Reverend," said the young attendant, "I'm so sorry about the delay. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip." The minister chuckled, "I know what you mean. It's the same in my business."¹

What is this season of Advent about? What do we need to do to become more like God? From what do I need to be released or set free? This season of Advent, then, is not simply about awaiting the birth of Jesus, but the realization of Jesus' place in our hearts, our priorities, our lives. May we have the courage to be open and empty so there is room for him to come in.

NOTES

1. Fr Peter Newsam in a sermon from <http://www.sacredheartpetworth.org.uk/assets/pdf/HomilyAdvent1c09.pdf>
2. From <http://ralphmiltonsrumors.blogspot.com/2009/11/preaching-materials-for-november-29.html>