

Sermon, 2 December 2007—Advent 1

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-4; Matthew 24:36-44

On this Sunday, the three foundational principles of all spiritual life come together. It is the First Sunday of Advent, so we hear lessons that insist on our limitations and finitude. Jesus tells us we do not know when the coming of the Son of Man will be. But we also have designated this Sunday our Celebration of Abundance. We have gathered to rejoice over what we do know: the many blessings showered on us by God. At the same time, we have asked to the pledges you are making for 2008.

This year, your stewardship committee placed before you a mix of personal witness and fiscal pragmatism. We have heard what St. John's means to several members, who spoke with affection, candor, trust, and recognition of your support and love. They bore witness that you hold for them the trellis that allows them to grow spiritually. We have also heard honesty of another kind: honesty about our financial liabilities and challenges. This required just as much affection and candor, just as much trust and recognition of your commitment to our common life. These speakers also bore witness, but it was to their hope that you will continue to maintain and enlarge the structures that support our shared life in every way.

All of this has been placed in the largest context of God's abundance. The vision that Isaiah has—Mount Zion raised up as the highest mountain, all nations streaming up to it, instruction and judgment pouring down from it—that is a vision of the greatest abundance. Only such a conviction of abundance would empower people to beat swords into plowshares and not to learn war any more. When there is a conviction of abundance such as this, then self-protection and defensiveness, self-assertion and competition,

raiding and hoarding, all disappear. Isaiah says the Word of the Lord will go forth from Jerusalem to arbitrate between many people and to bring them to reconciliation and the ways of peace. The Word of the Lord is known by its ability to make peace.

How do we recognize the peace made by the Word of the Lord? If peace is merely the suppression of enmities, if peace is simply ferocity cowed into silence by a greater wrath, if peace is nothing but withdrawal and withholding and minimal participation, then it is not God's peace. God's peace releases energy and increases trust. Isaiah's vision of God's peace is the cultivation of land, plowing and pruning, warriors turned farmers, side by side. God's peace generates abundance. Just as our restless cravings and anxiety show us that we have no peace and can make no peace, awareness of abundance is a sign that we are at peace, that we are rooted in God's peace, that we can become agents of God's peace.

Abundance, you see, is not about quantity, but about quality. It has nothing to do with our actual cash flow, our bank accounts, our securities. It has everything to do with our dear older brother Paul's insight: "I know what it is to have little and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Nothing other than a taste of the indwelling God, the One who strengthens us, can satisfy us, but if we do come to taste that, we do not thirst again. Perhaps I should put it this way: once we have come to realize that we no longer thirst, we begin to trust that what we are tasting is the presence of God in us. To be able to do all things through the One who strengthens us is to live in abundance, because that source of power is inexhaustible.

This is why the lessons of the First Sunday of Advent are so alarming and so helpful: they cause us to ask what in our life is secure and what is at risk. What might I lose when the thief comes in the night, and what can no thief ever break in and steal? What will wear out, and what can neither moth nor rust ever consume? What is this eagerness for marrying and giving in marriage, for contracts and promises, when, on that day, two will be in a field, and one will be taken and the other will be abandoned, that day when two will be grinding, and one will be taken and the other will be left bereft?

Our sense of abundance cannot be based on what is coming to an end, on what we cannot retain, on what we will leave behind. If we think abundance is determined by our sense of what we can eat and drink and our ability to obtain those things according to our desires, then by all means, let us join in the party that was going on in the days of Noah—and, by the way, we should join soon, and not waste a day of our self-pursuit and self-interest and self-satisfaction, because there is never enough and someone else might get there before we do. Then, of course, we might be generous, but only with what for the moment seems to us superfluous, the funds we don't anticipate needing. But the truth is this: no accumulation of particles matters, because the flood comes and sweeps it all away. The heap of trinkets and tidbits is, by its very nature, fragmentary and impermanent. To separate out something for God from our leftovers is laughable, unless it is pathetic, because if we really do scramble across such a terrifying landscape of scarcity, any gift we make to God is either an act of benighted courage or of cowardly bribery. This bleak terrain cannot be where eternal and overflowing abundance wells up; I pray you do not dwell there.

Jesus recommends only one thing: “keep awake, be ready, stay alert, watch.” The wonder of this season is that this turns out to be sufficient. I

said that today we have brought together the essential ingredients of the casserole of our spiritual life. The first is this: “pay attention, don’t fall asleep, notice what is real and speak what is true.” This, my dear sisters and brothers, is a lifetime’s work. We are prone to self-deception and therefore to the deception of others. We represent ourselves as what we are not endlessly to our deepest self and to each other—to hide our shame, to bid for power, to gain advantage, to avoid retribution, and always, please God, not to know our abjection. But the truth is, we choose what we are willing to know and ready to face; the choice is always ours. Every time we pray we choose for or against honesty. We choose fantasy or fact every time we pray. If our prayers seem unanswered, it is because we try to recruit God to shore up our delusions—God, who is instead the sustainer of all truth and of all that is! So the vital question is how prayer can arise from fact.

Prayer arises from fact when it is a struggle to acknowledge in the presence of God where we, flesh, soul, and spirit, are embedded; that is all. Where is our flesh invested? How is our body being compromised? How is our body being sustained? How is that paid for? Where is our soul invested? Are our mind and heart spinning narratives of consolation or of desolation? Who is made to bear the burden of those stories? Where is our spirit invested? Are our depths and heights relaxed or clenched, releasing or hardening, flowing with God-centered trust or stagnant with self-centered fear? “Keep awake; stay alert; watch; because you do not know!”

Over time, we come to realize that in this moment, all is sufficient. Everything we need in order to be alive in this moment has been given to us. Over time, we come to realize that we can therefore trust the next moment to bring everything we need for life. Through no effort of our own, our life rolls on; it is sheer gift. Your being alive this moment, not dead, is evidence

of the most extravagant and unmerited gift. What have you done to deserve life, to become alive, to share life with all that lives? “Stay awake!”

This attention to our life itself, held in focus this way, becomes gratitude. This is the second great pillar that holds up the temple of our spiritual life. Attention is the first; gratitude is the second. Once we come to understand how arbitrary and unnecessary our life is, gratitude begins to unfold in us. We cannot realize how surprising and unexpected our existence is, without being startled into awed gratefulness. If we believe we are made for happiness, we need only look at the evidence of how we become sustainably happy in order to find our fit with the Creation. If I believe I am the center of the universe, the arbiter of what is proper and pleasurable and functional and reasonable, then other people’s inability to grasp this is a constant provocation of resentment, and my inability to repair my past and to ensure my future is a constant irritation of fear. But if I recognize that I might not have been at all, but am nevertheless here, a creature among a myriad other creatures, a friend among countless friends, a worker among unknown fellow workers, by the grace of God, then I’m floating in the gravy boat. What isn’t a source of joy and wonder and gratitude, since each encounter is a discovery of another creature, another friend, another worker, companions all on this pilgrimage towards God?

Every great journey has widenings in the road, where we can pull off and admire the view. If we pause to contemplate the gift of our life, then we can see that all this abundance of life and delight which we come to perceive as true in each moment and sustaining us in each moment, this generosity of life for us and towards us, this Love active in the cosmos, this same sense of abundance, once we grasp this as each breath that enters and leaves us, this insight frees us to release our own ripple in this cosmic abundance to flow

through us and towards others. Gratitude graduates, in other words, from being in feeling to being in action, because we want the gift we give in response to be as palpable and potent as the gift we have received.

This, then, is the third strand of the hawser of spirituality that we weave: attention, gratitude, and gift. We see we give nothing of our own, but only pass on what has been given to us. We might think at first of tangible and material matters—and that is important, because we and others have bodies, and bodies need shelter and food and safety. Time and treasure and talent all can be offered to ease suffering and to bring delight, to sustain what causes human beings to flourish and to repair what causes them to wither. Without this material foundation, the rest is not possible.

But more must be possible, because we also need to be prompt to give the more difficult and more lasting gifts of the soul. We need to give trust and patience and compassion and encouragement and forgiveness. We will feel the cost of these gifts, because they require a readiness to set our self aside for the sake of the person to whom we are making the gift. We know that one soul can serve and mold another, because we recognize the impact of others in our own life, for good and for ill. That is the evidence that it is possible to make a lasting gift, from one soul to another. So we know that the gift we make will plant either vitality or decay in those we claim to love. When we act out of attention and gratitude, our gift will be life-enhancing, not life-destroying.

Only gradually, dear brothers and sisters, do we come to understand the greater gifts being made. No one said this more clearly than our dear older brother Paul: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ... If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned, but have not love,

I gain nothing.” Paul did not mean some personal flutter of warmth; he meant the highest gift of God’s Spirit. The love by which we act is not our own any more than the life in which we act is our own. I am convinced not one of us could make it across the desert of our self-absorption, where we will die of thirst, under our own efforts, even if we had centuries at our disposal, to reach the wellsprings of compassion, if God did not make divine love known in the core of our spirit under the appearance of a severe and terrifying mercy. The humiliations and illnesses and losses and deaths that render us down to our essence scrape off the topsoil of our distractions and pretensions down to the water table of love that keeps us in life. This love, patient and imperturbable, which we discover sustaining us when we sink beyond human reach, is the ultimate gift, the gift made first to our spirit, which we can only give as spirit to spirit, but which we finally discover we give as God and to God, because it has no other habitation, no other circulation, but the unending life of the most holy Trinity.

Today, though, as we enter the season of Advent and as we celebrate the abundance in which we float forever, we begin with simple things. It is enough to remember to be alert, to be grateful, and to make your gift. God will add the increase and the blessing, so that in everything we might show forth the glory of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Son, and the Life-giving Spirit, One God, whom we praise today in joyful anticipation and to whom we look in hope.