

Advent Sunday  
Isaiah 64.1-9/I Cor. 1.3-9/Mark 13.24-37  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
30 November 2008

~Paul H. Friesen~

The colour today is purple, the colour of a Monarch;  
the colour of King who has returned to hold court;  
the colour of a king who has come to make justice by his judgements.

We have come today to worship in a special way;  
we have come to prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of the King on  
Christmas Day;  
the King who makes things right.  
So we have to talk about judgement.<sup>1</sup>

This is the first Sunday of Advent.  
We don't get to John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord till next week.  
We don't get to that babe in the manger till Christmas.

We begin Advent with the judgement of the world, as we have just heard.  
We begin this first day of the Christian year with the tearing open of the skies  
and the stars falling from the heavens; with mountains quaking and the sun  
being blotted out.

It is why we began our worship by calling for God's mercy.

But the idea of judgement has had a rough ride for a while.

There is no easier way for any one of us to stop a conversation about our life  
than to say to someone 'you're judging me', whether this is true, or true in our  
imagination.

We simply don't like to be judged.

On the other hand, it has always been too easy for us to judge those around us  
with a different set of rules than we use for ourselves.  
It's always been too easy to judge terrible things, especially in far off places.

Maybe you have heard the news this weekend about a large department store in  
Valley Stream, New York, not far from Manhattan.<sup>2</sup> It opened early, at 5.00 a.m.  
this past Friday with the promise of special prices. A crowd of 2000 formed

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<sup>1</sup> Much is still debated about the origins of the season of Advent, but this much is clear. See Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), p.147-55.

<sup>2</sup> The story is by Colleen Long of Associated Press in the *Detroit Free Press*, 29 November 2008; the other details come from the same story or its side bars.

outside, and as they entered they buckled the door frame, an trampled to death a temporary staff member. Though they may not have known he died, some stepped over him on their rush to get to the bargains. But the horror settled in quickly. As one woman put it: 'Some man lost his life because a VCR was on sale.'

I don't know if you know it but in the United States, the day after their Thanksgiving Day is called Black Friday—

not black because of mourning over accidents like this, but black because it is the first day of Christmas shopping when for the first time in the year retail stores emerge from the red—a deficit—and enter the black—they become profitable.

But for at least some shoppers in New York the day will be forever purple because of what they saw, because of what they participated in—they know judgement is at hand.

Something is wrong, and so we cry out to God together, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...to make your name known.'

But we know as Christians, don't we, that this judgement will involve us—we know this and we confess this, but it is awfully hard to accept this in practice.

Yet there is no point to Advent; there is no point to confessing our sin together weekly if we don't believe divine judgement has to do with the whole human race—including us. Jesus died for the world, including the Walmart worker trampled in New York. And somehow we were all a part of the crowd around him.

Well, we're actually not supposed to leave an Advent Sunday service of worship depressed. We're meant to leave with truth in our minds, and hope in our hearts. We're meant to leave worship with forgiveness assured and a desire for change.

What do our scriptures teach us about ourselves, in relation to God's judgement? Three years ago on this Sunday I offered three things. I would like to offer these same three things again to you, but in a different way.

What do our Scriptures teach us?

*First*, we are to live as if judgement is an *expression of God's character* rather than a defect in God's character—not the work of the devil in one of God's weak moments.

*Second* we are to live as if divine judgement were *at hand* rather than waiting for us at the end of our life.

And *third*, we are to live as if divine judgement were *meant to restore* us rather than destroy us.

Let's begin with the first: divine judgement is an *expression of God's character*. This is to say that God is a moral creator who created us to be like him—moral creatures with ethical lives.

Christians confess that they live in a universe where good and bad actions have consequences, no matter how remote—all because of the moral way in which God brought our universe into being. What we do matters.

That is why in Isaiah's great prophecy even the skies and the mountains feel God's moment of judgement and tremble.

But how can a loving God judge us? The answer is obvious! How can a loving God *not* judge us?

How can a loving God look at his starving children and not speak a word of judgement to his children whose every hunger is satisfied? How can a loving God not judge our ill treatment of others when God loves the others equally well?

God loves us far too much to say all of this doesn't matter. It is why the prophet Isaiah cries out, actually calling for God to show his face in the midst of moral chaos.

'You have hidden your face from us,' says Isaiah to God, 'and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.' That is to say, you have let us taste the consequences of our own bad choices.

Now, says the prophet, we would rather meet you and hear your judgement, and receive mercy than wallow around in our own moral mess, pretending there is no human problem, or just a little problem, or mostly someone else's problem.

Judgement is a part of God's character. And though we can't always know who is responsible, how much and for what, we can know that to avoid judgement is to avoid God himself. Today we are meant to call for God to show his face; to see the face we have been avoiding.

*Second* we are to live as if divine judgement were *at hand* rather than waiting around for us at the end of our life.

In the *Gospel of Mark* Jesus clearly states that the signs of coming judgement can be seen by the wise—even by the foolish as it draws closer.

With the budding of leaves, summer is on its way—so certain is judgement. Indeed, an unhinged addict may know in a clear moment that his life is beginning to collapse, that the consequences cannot forever be held at bay.

And yet Jesus makes it quite clear that it is being ready that matters, not knowing exactly ‘when’ judgement will come.

Three times Jesus makes the point:  
‘you do not know when the time will come’,  
‘you do not know when the master of the house will come,’ and ‘no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’

So we are urged to live before God each moment, loving God with our whole selves, loving our neighbours as ourselves. We’re not encouraged to put off doing the right thing, nor to put off finding out what it is.

We’re meant to enjoy lives with the benefit of God’s correction and our repentance,  
We’re meant to live as if God’s judgment were at hand, ready to change our lives for the better.  
We’re meant to enjoy lives lived joyfully.

And this brings us to our *third* confession.

We are to live as if divine judgement were *meant to restore* us rather than to destroy us.

This is why we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ *for us*. The greatest act of judgment was the one in which Christ took our place, and bore the full force of the sin of the world. Divine judgement was satisfied.

Judgement in our lives, now, is what sets our lives on the right course, what helps us live the lives we were always meant to live.

St. Paul said in today’s Epistle that the work of God in our lives is a work of ‘enrichment’;  
it is the granting to us of ‘gifts’,  
it a work of ‘strengthening [us] to the end.’

If we ask our children to believe this when we correct them, how can we live as if this weren’t true for ourselves?

We have everything to gain, and nothing to loose if we live this way, if we put the moments of judgement in the world, in our parish, and in our lives—if we put all these moments of judgement *within* God’s love for us all.

That is we have everything to gain and nothing to lose if –

If we live as if judgement were a part of our God's character for our good.  
Because it is.

If we live as if judgement were at hand, not distant. It is.

And again, if we live as if divine judgement will restore us rather than destroy us. It will.

We are asked to live as if Christ were coming, this Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, because Christ is coming.

And we begin to live this way, right now, in our celebration of Holy Communion.