

Today we continue our advent journey together. Advent, the season of waiting for God. We wait for God who becomes incarnate--God come to earth as a human being. *And* we wait for God coming finally, as the judge of all, at the end of time. We recognize the first coming. We live in the last.

Fearing expulsion from paradise is a reality of which we rarely speak, but which most of us hold in our souls...somewhere. Few of us rest confidently in our ultimate heavenly welcome. Advent is the time we bring these fears into our consciousness and our lectionary texts utter them out loud.

In today's Gospel John the Baptist is calling the people to repent from their sins, and be baptized in the river Jordan. John proclaims that he is preparing the way for the one who is coming, one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. This messiah will not Baptize with water, but rather will cover his beloved with the holy Spirit and will purify them with fire. John withholds this promise, however, from the religious leaders, that brood of vipers who live lives of hypocrisy, criticism and corruption. They cannot be saved, they will be damned. The holy king come to save the worthy, and destroy the rest.

2000 years later, this advent at Saint Ann's in Old Lyme, we wait again for God incarnate. But these readings, about "being alert," and "staying awake for we know not the hour," don't quite mesh with our understanding of a loving God. And yet, in spite of this dissonance, do not these warnings judgment based on our behavior, stir in many of us guilt... and subsequent fear? If the end is God in heaven with a list of those deemed worthy and not...then I might be in trouble. (Some are more sure of this trouble than others.)

You know what, I don't have time to deal with the state of my eternal soul right now. Its Christmas, I've got a social engagement at 6:00 and four gifts to buy en route.

Off to the mall we go, seeking solace in Barbie and Burl Ives. Mmmm...Silver Bells, Silent Night, "You better *watch out*, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why. *Santa Clause is coming* to town. He's *making a list*, checking it twice. He's gonna *find out* who's *naughty* or *nice*. Santa Clause is *coming* to town. He sees you when you're *sleeping*. He knows if you're *awake*. He knows if you've been *bad* or *good*. *So be good*....I might as well go back to church.

Judgement and fear of it. It is the air we breath. We teach our children it is wrong to judge, and yet we define ourselves and our worlds by our evaluative judgments. We judge the man in the express line with ...(count) 14 items in his carriage, We judge the mother in front of him, with the screaming child. We judge those who have and consequently *are*, less and more: less bright, less competent, less giving, more wealthy, more faithful. We judge our family and our friends, our family's friends and our friends families. We judge hypocrites and addicts, racists and foreigners. The fat, and way too thin. And then we judge ourselves, for being judgmental.

Last week Peter spoke of God's devastating judgement of the human race in the Flood. We, created in God's image, tend to employ the same tactics. We destroy one another and ourselves with our criticism and judgment, born of anger, insecurity and fear. And all of this resentment and judgement -- of self, of others, and ultimately of God.. All of this rage (s) gathered up into a toxic ball, and hurled at the Cross...and it killed him.

In the end, *we* rejected God, declaring his Son to be unworthy to live in our presence. We excised Jesus from *our list* of the

avored, and it destroyed him. The last banishment, the last rejection, the last punitive judgement...was ours.

And now, awake and aware of our own destructive power . We, like God after the flood, repent. We kneel before the cross, before the one whose sandals we are not worthy to untie. And in our shame, Christ comes to us, meets our gaze and whispers, "It is finished."

There is no longer any need for striving to earn my father's favor. It is finished. Your worth is no longer evaluated according to your works of righteousness. It is finished. Your fearing the loss of my love, heartbreaking...unimaginable. My children, I wait for *you* to come to me, into my arms, I wait for the Advent of you.

And yet we sit, motionless in unlocked cells, bound by loosed chains, unable to integrate the gift of absolute freedom and grace. Is criticism and judgment of ourselves and others, chaff that we can bear to have stripped away? Is yielding to divine unqualified embrace, a purifying fire we can withstand? How will we live? How will we know who we are? Friends. This is our journey of redemption. To ask daily for the courage to embrace the final work of work cross. To let go of any fears of God's rejection, allowing our anxiety and sadness to fall away like chaff. We *are* forgiven. We *are* sealed. We *are desperately loved*. It is finished.