

November 28, 2021

Have you ever anticipated an event with so much enthusiasm that you completely overlooked something else that may have been just as important but less impressive? Maybe you went with a group of friends to watch your favorite team win a championship game. But you were disappointed when your team lost, and only later realized that the time spent with your friends was the greater reward and was far more important than whether your team won or lost. Or maybe you have been saving money to purchase a new dream car or truck but finally realized to your disappointment that your dream vehicle was out of reach. So, you bought something more practical and less expensive and had enough money left over to treat your family to an unexpected and much-appreciated weekend getaway. In both of these hypothetical scenarios, enthusiastic anticipation overshadowed but eventually gave way to something less impressive but even more important. One cold winter evening, when I was really young, a rare snowstorm was approaching our farm. My father put me to bed that night telling me that a white horse would be in our yard the next morning. When morning came, I bounded out of bed and ran to the window to see that white horse. But instead, to my disappointment, all I saw was a thick blanket of snow covering the ground. I may not have realized it at the time, but I learned something about symbolism and metaphors that morning. I eventually got over my disappointment, and I finally accepted that in the long run the snow was more fun, more beneficial, and less trouble than a real white horse.

“What does this have to do with today’s readings?” you may be asking. Well, I sometimes think we fall into a similar trap in anticipating the second coming of Christ. We read about the apocalypse in Sacred Scripture, and our attention is captured by all the cosmic disarray, the earthly devastation, and the human hysteria that is so vividly depicted in those passages. These descriptions can be so overwhelming that they might even cause us to overlook the hope that ensues when the Son of Man appears “in a cloud with power and great glory” to rescue believers. Apocalyptic literature, like that just read from the Gospel of Luke and what is prevalent in the Old Testament Book of Daniel, was typically written during times of distress, not to frighten people, but to give them hope and confidence. Today’s Gospel was written after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by Roman soldiers. The Book of Daniel was

written during the Babylonian Exile. In both circumstances the Jewish people were oppressed and persecuted. They were dejected. Luke and Daniel called on them to look beyond their miseries by offering them visions of a new day.

Much like the ancient Israelites, we could use some confidence and hope in our world today. News reports of corruption, war, genocide, and terrorism all over the world; along with our own personal struggles with injustice, disease, conflicts, and addictions; are major sources of anxiety and despair for many of us. Add to that the reality of climate change and its growing record of threats to God’s creation, and our world is beginning to feel more and more like the catastrophic scenes depicted in apocalyptic literature. But Holy Scripture gives us hope and confidence just as it did the people of ancient Israel. Christ will come again “with power and great glory” to fulfill the promise of God’s Kingdom, a kingdom of justice and mercy. In anticipating that spectacular future event, however, we cannot overlook the work we are called to do today. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is already with us, and Christ has challenged us to begin now building the Kingdom that he will complete at the end of time. So, rather than sitting on our hands and waiting for the big event, we must prepare for it. Much is involved – loving one another and caring for those in need; advocating for justice, security, and peace for all people; healing the earth; and restoring the intrinsic dignity of all God’s creation.

I am reminded of an old story about a Christian fundamentalist who denied climate change until the day his home was flooded. As water began flowing into the front door of his house, a fire truck drove up and a fireman called to the man to let them take him to a shelter. He respectfully declined, saying God would save him. A few hours later, as water reached the windowsills, a boat motored up and a rescuer begged the man to get in and go with them. Once again, the man said, “No, thank you. God will save me.” Finally, with water lapping the eaves of his home, the man climbed to the top of his roof. A helicopter flew over and a crew member threw him a rope. But, once again, the man declined the rescue, saying that God would save him. The next day, his house was completely submerged, and the man was swept away. At the pearly gates, he asked Saint Peter, “Why did God not save me?” To which Peter replied, “What were you expecting. God sent you a fire truck, a boat, and a helicopter.” God is always with us, always looking out for us, but we must also do our part.

After each verse of today's responsorial Psalm, we sang the refrain, "To You, O Lord, I lift my soul." We sang those words a total of five times. But did we mean them? Or perhaps we should first ask, do we truly understand them? Calling for much more than a simple, empty gesture, these words proclaim our readiness to be moved beyond our own self-interests to know and to do God's will. They imply humility and an openness to learning. They affirm the covenant of love between God and God's people. On this First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical year, if we truly mean the words we have sung, we are telling God, "I am confident, I have hope, and I am prepared to do my part to help build Your Kingdom."