

**A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Edwin Smith for Advent 1, Year C
November 29th, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin**

Advent is a strange season. Stores are full of Christmas decorations. Even a popular Christian radio station is playing Christmas carols much of the day. Our hearts begin to fill with the joy of the nativity. But our lessons bring us up short. The gospel message for today reminds us that Bethlehem is only one chapter in God's story of salvation.

Advent properly reaches back into the promises of the prophets, while at the same time pointing forward to the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan.

Advent is a holy time--a time to remember the first coming of God's son--and also a time to voice our conviction that the ultimate return of God's son is yet to come.

That ultimate return will mirror the initial arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem. In our gospel lesson, we face with three things: the certainty of crisis, the assurance of hope, and the weight of responsibility.

Every Christ event is marked by crisis. At his birth, the question was asked, "Is this truly the fulfillment of God's promise?" then, those who heard him speak and saw him minister were forced to ask, "Can I believe? Will I believe that this man is who he claims to be?" and at his resurrection, the questions continued. "Could this be true? Has he really risen?"

And even today, the questions arise from deep within: "Is he really coming back?" the questions call us to personal crisis. Will we believe? Can we believe?

But there is more. The gospel writer reminds us there is cosmic crisis, as well. All creation groans under the weight of sin and all creation awaits the fulfillment of God's plan. Christ was born in Bethlehem in a time of crisis. His life and ministry confront us with crisis. And his ultimate coming will be marked by that same kind of crisis.

The natural response to crisis, whether personal or cosmic, is fear and dread. But, surprisingly, the gospel writer calls us to hope. In anticipation of Christ's coming, we are invited to stand up and lift up our heads, because we know that our redemption is near. With confidence and hope, the people of God understand that cosmic crisis points to the arrival of God's kingdom.

Let it never be said that the Christian faith lacks realism. Every tenet of our faith reminds us that suffering is real and costly and devastating. Every word of our Lord challenges us with the pain and disappointment of living in this kind of world. But every word of somber realism is clothed in a word of hope.

Certainly, the crisis is real. Yet God will win in the end. Without question, pain and sorrow will grip the lives even of God's people. Yet God's hope is sure.

The coming of God in Christ is the reality that compels God's people of promise to see hope in the midst of crisis.

Vaclav Havel, playwright, essayist, and president of the Czech Republic, wrote about hope. He said, "Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will work out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to

live and to continuously try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love, and finally, without hope.”

All of this points to the weight of our responsibility. The theological realities of crisis and hope find their conclusion in the ethical demands of readiness and preparation. Because this is a time of crisis, it matters how we live. Because of the certainty of our hope, it matters how we live. The proper response to both crisis and hope is watchfulness, personal discipline, and breathless anticipation. True belief, in every case, ushers forth into obedience and faithfulness.

The events of Bethlehem teach the same truths. Jesus Christ forces us to choose; every word and every action of his life draw us into personal crisis. Even in crisis, he both grants his hope and calls us to hope.

And, finally, he refuses to allow us to keep his call at arm's length. Rather, his words cut us to the heart and demand the response of true faith and obedience. As it was with Bethlehem, so also with the ultimate coming of God's son. As important as Bethlehem is to us, there is yet another chapter of the story to be written. And that is what advent is all about: he is coming, and we need to be ready.