

Advent 1C Sermon 112909
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

In the name of the God who arrival we anticipate, Amen.

Every year at this time we begin another journey through Advent. This is the relatively short season of the Church year in which we wait - and hopefully prepare - for two events: the remembrance of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ; and His Second Coming in glory to bring judgment and eternal perfection to God's creation.

In the collect of the day this morning, we prayed that, "in the last day, when (Jesus) shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead," we would hopefully be ready for that judgment. To be judged by Jesus Christ - now if that's not an image that could strike fear into one's heart, I don't know what could.

Most of us live in fear of judgment. On some level, we are afraid of being judged by just about everyone. If you have a job out in the world, you probably worry about being judged deficient by your boss or co-workers; something that could result in loss of pay, or even loss of a job. If you're a student, the judgment is pretty open and obvious; every semester there are grade reports that go out to you - and to your parents - that give an instant accounting of how you have performed; where you have done well and where you have not. But for most students - indeed for most people - there is another type of judgment that strikes much greater fear into the heart than does the fear of taking a bad grade home to mom and dad. That fear is the fear of being judged unacceptable by one's

peers.

One of the great desires in life is to be liked. We all want to be the most popular person in our circle; the person voted “most beautiful,” “best personality,” “funniest,” and of course “most popular,” by all our friends and acquaintances. It is a very natural thing to want to be looked up to and admired. And the opposite of that is: it is naturally fear-inducing to worry about people NOT looking up to you - NOT thinking highly of you.

The number one fear inducer in the world is public speaking. That is a fact, not because we are afraid of forgetting what we wanted to say or because what we say will not be all that great - but because we fear that after we have spoken, people will not like us and will say mean things about us behind our backs. No one likes to be judged “less than” another person. No one likes to be told that they are not worthy of being liked or respected. And it is all of those fears and concerns that WE bring to our understanding of Jesus’ coming judgment.

What we know about judgment is what we have experienced. And for most of us that is not a positive thing. Because we do not - in fact CANNOT - understand God, we project human traits on God and then call them fact. Preachers in the 19th century “holiness movement” in the United States perfected this penchant for making God like us. Holiness preachers are known for preaching forcefully on issues of sin. They “Know sin when they see it, and they call it out when they recognize it.” That means that such preachers judged all of the people in their congregations, supposedly in the name of God,

and then told those who were deficient what it would take in order to be “saved,” from the hellfire and damnation that assuredly awaited them if they failed to repent and confess Jesus Christ as their Savior.

It is from these preachers that much of America learned its theology of sin, judgment and redemption. Imagine learning what you know about God from someone who has made it his business to scare you into conversion. What kind of image of God can possibly come out of that? The answer is: a God who is angry and waiting to judge you deficient in some way in order to banish you to a lake of fire in the outer reaches of hell. Well I’m here to tell you today that the God of anger and petty judgment is a fictional creation of humans, not the God who is revealed in Scripture.

What we of the Anglican traditions understand about sin is that it is simply separation from God. In other words, when we do things that move us farther away from God at the center of our lives we are in sin. If that is our understanding of what sin is, then it becomes easier to see “sins” (plural) as those individual things we do that *lead* us into a state of sinfulness or separation from God. That means that there is no need for a God who is scorekeeper - who lives to catch us in minor peccadilloes and then punish us, because the God who created the world wants it to be perfected, and wants our help in bringing it to perfection.

If we look at the overall sweep of Scripture, we can see that God created humans as partners in the process of creation. Not that God needs our help, but rather that God

wants us to be engaged enough to help. From the earliest stories in Genesis through the Revelation to John, we can see a God who wants relationship with humanity, but who gets rebuffed over and over again. Each time people in the Bible rejected God's attempts to bring them into relationship, God tried another way of reaching them. Until finally there was Jesus.

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, the incarnational reality of God, was God's attempt to bring people into relationship by being one of them. Through Jesus, the God of all creation experienced humanity and according to some theologians, deepened God's already limitless love for us as children. The God who loved us so much that He became human to put a human face on Godly love, could never be so petty vindictive as to count up the things we do wrong in order to make us "pay" for them.

My understanding of the "Judgment" that Jesus refers to in His apocalyptic writings is that Jesus will, in essence, hold a mirror up in front of us and allow us to judge ourselves. In such a process we would be brought face-to-face with everything we did in life that moved us farther away from the true love of God. Through such an examination we would be able to see the error of our lives and be ready to enter into the eternal Kingdom of God.

So why don't we just sin all the way through our lives and then count on the grace of God at the last minute - at the last judgment - in order to be absolved of all sins and then enter into eternal salvation? The short answer is, we do. There is not a person here

this morning who is not a sinner. And by that, I don't just mean the big - singular - sin I spoke of before. No, I mean all of the multitude of little "sins" that we commit on an ongoing basis. If we're honest, there is not a one of us who could stand up to the scrupulous standards of the holiness preachers. In fact, those who think that they are most virtuous are - in the words of the Apostle Paul - chief among the sinners, because they believe themselves to be above all of the other people. And excessive pride is nothing other than idolatry, because it is trying to place oneself in the exalted position of God above all one surveys.

I don't believe that Jesus' coming judgment of us will be anything like a report card. Nor do I believe that it will be anything like the school elections for most popular student. I believe that the God "who loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son to the end that all who believe in Him should not perish, but have eternal life," that same God has already judged us and found us to be beloved children of an eternally loving Father.

Take comfort as Christmas approaches. The judgment is coming. But so is the baby whose love will save us - even from ourselves.