

Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America :Sundays of Advent: Planting the Seeds for the New Covenant



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Sundays of Advent: Planting the Seeds for the New Covenant

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Unlike Great Lent, the Advent Season stands without additional weekday services or Sunday remembrances that would help us keep the fast for the forty days and help prepare us for Christ's birth. I have always been disturbed that the Church has not responded to this lacuna, that is, until this year.

When I read Archimandrite Vassilios Papavasiliou's Meditations for Advent: Preparing for Christ's Birth, I began to see connections I had missed. He brings together readings from Scripture, including the Odes of the Old Testament, the seasonal troparia from the Compline Service and Vespers, writings from the Fathers, and other sources, to flesh out the Nativity Season. As I began to prepare Sunday Sermons, too, I discovered that the Epistle and Gospel readings focus on one of the reasons Christ came to dwell among us. We are all familiar with His coming to defeat death and the Devil, and to re-open the Gates of Paradise for us. He also came to inaugurate the New Covenant, and the readings of the Sundays of

Advent make this quite clear.

In these readings, we are reminded that Christ publicly challenged the Jewish leadership's focus on the Law – the Old Covenant. As He says at one point, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13). Throughout His public ministry, He purposefully performs acts that upset them to the point – as we know – that they ultimately seek His crucifixion.

The Epistle readings vary from year to year, but usually for the first Sunday of Advent it is from St Paul's Letter to the Galatians, in which he warns them that the Jewish leadership "would compel you to be circumcised," even though "not even those who are circumcised keep the law" (Galatians 6:12-13). So, why keep the Law? Christ is preparing them and us for something new.

On the second Sunday, St Paul writes to the Ephesians "that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the tyranny of men" (Ephesians 4:14). Rather, we should stand fast to Christ's teachings. The men of tyranny to which Paul refers were the Jewish leaders who adhered strictly to the Law as they interpreted it.

The Gospel lessons for the first two Sundays of Advent appear to have no relation to the season. The first is the story of the Foolish Rich Man, who would tear down his barns and build bigger ones to house the windfall that came from God (Luke 12:16-21). The second deals with the Rich Young Man seeking eternal life (Luke 18:18-27). Christ calls the first one a "fool" and depicts God asking for his soul that very night. He tells the second one to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow Him. Christ's message to them and to us is to use one's wealth to help others, and not to spend it exclusively for one's own benefit. We are to do the same with the gifts God has given us, as did the early Christians. We learn in the Book of Acts that they pooled their resources and gave to others as they had need (Acts 2:42-47). Almsgiving is one of the things we do during a fast.

On the third Sunday of Advent we read again from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians that Christ came to break down "the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments [that is, the Torah], so as to create in Himself one new man from the two [Gentile and Jew], thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity" (Ephesians 2:14). Clearly, Paul endorses Christ's replacing the "law of commandments" which applied exclusively to the Jews, and the bestowal of God's grace on all humanity. Further, he states that Christ came first to reconcile the estranged Jews to God and then to reconcile the

Jews to the Gentiles, so that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, master nor slave, male nor female, because all are one under Jesus Christ, making clear that the New Covenant is for everyone (Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11).

The fourth Sunday's reading from Ephesians emphasizes the message of the New Covenant that "There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all who is above all, and through all, and in you all." [Eph 4:4-6] In other words, we are all one in Jesus Christ. No one is superior to another, no one is shunted aside, no one is without God's grace. This is a consequence of the New Covenant.

The theme of establishing a New Covenant continues throughout Advent. On the third Sunday we read in Luke's gospel about Jesus healing on the Sabbath a woman bent over for eighteen years. Here is one example of Jesus confronting the leaders of a synagogue directly who myopically hold to the Old Testament Laws. Indeed, they are indignant that anyone should do "work" on the Sabbath, and proclaim that there are six days to do work; the Sabbath is a day of rest. Jesus answers them forcefully. "Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound - think of it - for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?" His reply put "all His adversaries to shame; and the multitude rejoiced." [Luke 13:10-17]

Clearly, we are reminded during the Advent season that Jesus challenged the Old Covenant many times because He was laying the foundation for the New.

The fourth Sunday's Gospel from Luke tells the story of Jesus at a home of a Pharisee who had invited Him to dine (14:16-24). Jesus tells a parable that cannot be misunderstood. A certain man gave a great supper and invited many. But one after the other made excuses for not attending: one bought a piece of land, one bought five yoke of oxen, another just got married. When the man's servant reported these things to the master, the master became angry and told the servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind." When this was done there was still room for more. "Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.'" In this parable, those invited were the Chosen People, but some of them refused to attend. Jesus reminded the Jewish leaders that the Chosen People had not lived up to their end of the covenant that God had made with them. Now God would find others to come into His Kingdom. In Matthew's account of this parable Christ's

message was very clear to the Pharisees who had gathered to dine with Him: they then “went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk” (Matthew 22:1-15). (See also the Pharisee’s reaction when He dined with them at another time, in Luke 11:53-54.)

God’s attempt to reach His chosen people over the centuries, by sending prophets to admonish them and to remind them of God’s blessings, had not worked. By the time of the Prophet Jeremiah about the Seventh Century, B.C., God decided to establish a New Covenant, as He told Jeremiah:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

God made it clear to Jeremiah that the New Covenant He would inaugurate would supersede the Old. The Old would be replaced and no longer apply. Paul stresses this point in Galatians: “Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But, after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Galatians 3:24-25).

On the Sunday before the Nativity we read the human genealogy of Jesus Christ, to show that Jesus had an earthly ancestry. He did not appear out of nowhere. He came to fulfill the promise to Abraham, to David, and to others. “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise. God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Hebrew 11:39-41). The promise was that we should see the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ, the one we are preparing to meet at His Nativity.

Paul reminds us that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived before the Law was handed down to Moses. We can return to the time of the Patriarchs: Noah, Melchizedek, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The New Covenant ushered in a new world; one that we are struggling to experience.

The Scriptural readings for the Nativity season therefore do have a focus. They

orient us to one of the reasons God gave His only begotten Son, that is, to establish a New Covenant between Himself and all those who would believe in His Son, from every tribe and nation. We will all know Him in our hearts if we allow Him to enter.

What a gift! What a beneficent God! What a joy to be connected to the Immortal One!

Sadly, there are as yet no weekday services during Advent. We do, however, possess these Scriptural readings that give us one of the reasons for Christ's Nativity.

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

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