

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year C

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on December 1, 2024

Jeremiah 33:14-16 / Psalm 25:1-9 / 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 / Luke 21:25-36

*O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;  
Before you kings will shut their mouths,  
To you the nations will make their prayer:  
Come and deliver us, and delay no longer..*

Today is the first day of Advent – the season during which we anticipate the Coming of Christ – and we have/had a Baptism [at the 8am Service] . During Advent, scriptures help us reflect on the Coming Christ in two ways:

- The obvious and comfortable reflection takes us back to the foreshadowing of The Incarnation. We wax nostalgic on Luke's history that we've made into a charming and idyllic Hallmark movie that allows us to remain unchallenged by what The Incarnation was even ever about.
- The more challenging reflection is that of Christ's Return. The words of the Prophets were not solely foreshadowing The Incarnation. We believe them to continue to point us to Christ's Return, and in their words and the words of the Epistles, we hear how we have a role in Christ's Return as the Church, the Body of Christ on earth today.

As we welcome[d] Baby Henry Kimball as the newest member of the Body of Christ, and as we acclaim that we will uphold him in his new life in Christ [as we did this morning and you do by being a part of this parish], we can either assure him that all is well and that the beauty of the Holy Family in the manger will always be a comfort to him, or we can illustrate to him how the Messiah being born in a stinky, filthy animal barn encourages and empowers him to live out the Baptismal vows that his parents and godparents [are going to take] / [took] on his behalf today.

This short season of Advent has been given a lot of attention since its formation under Pope Gregory I in the 6C/7C. One of the durable themes for Advent

preaching and reflection has been *The 4 Last Things: Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven*. Clearly, the *best* way to support Henry in his new life in Christ is to ensure that he receives a full understanding of *Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven*, and that he has a mature view of *The 4 Last Things* at the point of his Confirmation.

So, as we baptize Henry at the beginning of Advent, I want us to reflect on what – if anything – *The 4 Last Things* have to do with our Baptismal Covenant. Our *scriptures* this morning cover *The 4 Last Things* quite well:

- Jesus' Parable of the Fig Tree is the foreshadowing of Death – death of all that is earthly, a death necessary to make way for all things heavenly.
- 1 Thessalonians wants to ensure that we are ready for the Day of Judgment when the writer boldly states: *[May the Lord] so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.*
- Jesus, in the paragraph preceding the Parable of the Fig Tree, may be describing the hell that we might have to endure in order to enter into Heaven, and some of us won't make it through the: *distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves, [when] people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.*
- And we might look at the brief passage from Jeremiah in which he offers a vision of the fulfilment of the promise of a messiah as a possible vision of Heaven.

But what – if anything – does *The 4 Last Things* have to do with Henry's Baptism and our Baptismal Covenant? Let's look at them in reverse order.

As Christians, we concern ourselves with Heaven and Hell, and probably too much and in unhealthy ways. What sort of Christian life do we want for Henry? Do we want to encourage him to live a life which will prevent him from going to Hell? Or do we want to encourage him to live a life that will ensure that he gets into

heaven? Those are 2 very different – and not uncommon – ways of living out one’s faith.

~~In a moment~~ [Just 2hrs ago], Henry’s parents and godparents ~~will make~~ [made] promises for him, and they will:

- Renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.
- Renounce all sinful desires that draw them from the love of God.

That kind of sounds like preventing him from going to Hell.

But they will also promise to:

- Turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as their Savior.
- Put their whole trust in Jesus’ grace and love.
- Promise to follow and obey Jesus as their Lord.

Which seems very much like helping Henry get into Heaven. *All* of these are important. *All* of these promises are part of our faith and practice of faith. Avoiding Hell and getting into Heaven should be a part of Henry’s life in Christ. But living one’s life solely in one of in those ways is ultimately destructive and often contradictory to the way that humans were created to relate to themselves, one another and the rest of Creation. So, what about living a life that brings Heaven to earth? How can we encourage Henry to be the sort of person who does the sort of things that brings Heaven to earth?

Henry, as a part of the Body of Christ – *WE* as the Body of Christ – should be working toward the kingdom of God being near, as Jesus says in the Gospel...or *for the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints* as it says in 1 Thessalonians. How can we support Henry in his life in Christ to *make him increase and abound in love for one another and for all*. We do that by helping Henry *seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving his neighbor as himself* and helping Henry *strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being*.

That is bringing Heaven to earth. Let's diminish Henry's anxiety about getting into Heaven or avoiding Hell. Let's encourage a more positive way to live out one's faith, one in which Henry could be building stronger relationships with himself, others and Creation.

Judgment:

*Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?*

As you support Henry in his life in Christ [*even though you were not present at his Baptism...he is part of this Family therefore we all have a duty to support him in his new life in Christ*], you need to impress upon him that Christ's Judgment isn't about condemnation. It's about returning to the Lord. No one is perfect; no one is sinless. Henry is going to make mistakes in his life. But Henry must know that he can *always* turn back to Christ. Jesus is not a "*one and done*" kind of Messiah. 1 Thessalonians may state that it is desirable "*that you may be blameless before our God*". That is an aspiration and not a reality. And for his own self-esteem and his own ability to remain a believer, Henry needs to know that there isn't a single human being who is blameless. The Final Judgment is not about those who are blameless. The Final Judgment is about those who have returned to the Lord...however many times they have needed to.

And finally, and most importantly, Death is front and center in our Baptism. In the *Prayer Over the Water* the priest says:

*We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in His Death. By it we share in His Resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.*

We have died in Christ and are born to new life in Him, sharing in His Resurrection. *This* death and re-birth is what we are bringing Henry into: a new life in Christ that *doesn't* point backward to the unrealistic charm of the Holy

Family in a cattle stall, but that points *forward* to Jesus' divine realm that Henry is invited to be a part of.

So, Advent and Baptism do bear some relation to *The 4 Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell*. But for Henry's sake (and you will no doubt meet him at some point in our life together as the St Stephen's Family) for Henry's sake – for *our* sake – let's have a better understanding of what *Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell* are so that he and we live lives that are always looking for Jesus to come again in glory: to have the grace to cast away the works of darkness, and to put on the armor of light.