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Advent 1

December 3, 2006

Zechariah 14:4-9

I Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-31

Of all the seasons of the church year, Lent, Pentecost, Epiphany, Easter and even Christmas, Advent is my favorite. I love Advent. I love the message of waiting, preparation, hope, expectation. I love the stillness and the silence Advent invites us to. I love the blue, the color of expectation that surrounds us in church. I look forward to the hymns that we will sing---Lo He Come with Clouds Descending--Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry, Creator of the Stars of Night --O Come, O Come Emmanuel. I love the candles shine in the deepening darkness. I love the scripture readings of Advent, the words of the prophets, the stories of John the Baptist, of Mary, Joseph, and the visitations of angels. I love the excitement that will build over the next few weeks. The hope and expectation, the waiting and the preparation make Advent my favorite season of the church year.

Because of this, I just could not understand why I could not get excited about preaching today for the first Sunday of Advent. I could not get at all excited by the readings from Zechariah, and Thessalonians. Most of the commentaries I read focused on Luke, and I must say, they quickly bored me. Most of them were focused on the visions of the end time which are part of today's Gospel, quoting books and authors from Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* to Tim Lahaye and the *Left Behind* series. The articles were not bad, but they left me bored and sleepy. (That's pretty scary isn't it....to fall asleep, reading about the end of the world). The articles were not bad, but they left me feeling absolutely no passion.

After reading about 20 of these commentaries and articles about the scripture, I remembered an article I had read in the New York Times this past week. It was an article written by Nicholas Kristof entitled "A Sister's Sacrifice". It is a column about the superhuman courage of many who are the victims of the Sudanese sponsored genocide that has taken place in the region around Darfur, and which has now spread into the country of Chad. It is, according to Kristof, a column about "the uplifting side of genocide".

The column begins with a story about Simih Yahya, an elderly man who stayed by his frail wife when their village was attacked by the janjaweed militia. The militia grabbed Mr. Simih threw him to the ground and piled grass on his back. They then started a bonfire on top of him. His wife, Halima, normally fragile and submissive, furiously tried

to tug the laughing militia members from her husband. She pleaded with them to spare his life. Finally she threw herself on top of the fire, burning herself but eventually extinguishing it with her own body. The militia may have been shamed by her courage, for they walked away saying: "He will die soon anyway".

Kristof writes about Suad Ahmed, a 25 year old mother of two from Darfur. Last month she was collecting firewood outside a refugee camp when they were ambushed by the militia. Her sister was a virgin. In the culture, a virgin who is raped will never be able to marry. Ms. Suad made herself a decoy, and let herself be caught while her sister escaped back to the camp. She was captured, gang raped by the militia and left to die. Later that evening, she was found by members of the camp, and carried back to safety. She says that the gang rape and beating were excruciating, but her sacrifice for her sister was worth it.

Luke writes in his Gospel today about a time of terror and distress on the earth. A time of fear and foreboding for all people.

In that time, the son of man will come. In that time, stand up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

We live in a time of terror and distress, fear and foreboding. Into this world, the son of man comes.

Advent prepares us celebrate the day the son of man came as a child in Bethlehem. Advent looks to that future day when we believe he will come to bring creation to its eternal glorious fulfillment. But advent is also a season when we celebrate our belief that God comes into our world today. We believe God comes in the courage, nobility and compassion that Kristof has witnessed throughout the Sudan. God comes in those who minister to victims of AIDS throughout the world. God comes in those who care for widows and orphans. Those who work for justice and peace. God comes in those who visit the lonely. God comes in those who remember and care for those whom the world too easily overlooks.

Advent is the season that reminds us that God comes through us. Advent asks us, what will you do? How will you stand up and raise your heads? How will you celebrate and proclaim that the kingdom of God is near?

Friends, in the midst of this month of darkness, in the midst of this season of frenzy Advent invites us to help bring to birth the dream of God. The silent stillness of Advent invites us to be alert. To be alert to those in our lives for whom this is a season of grief and sadness. Advent invites us to be alert to those opportunities in our lives to show these persons kindness and compassion Advent invites us to pray, and in our prayer to see signs of God's light shining in the darkness. Advent invites us to make preparations for God's coming. God's dream is of a reconciled world.

A world of forgiveness and mercy.

A world where people live in harmony with each other, indeed with all creation.

Advent invites us to seek reconciliation with those from whom we are estranged. God's dream is of a world of justice, a world where all have enough to eat and drink. We can prepare for God's coming by bringing our pennies, our dimes and our dollars to help build a filtration system for clean water that can save the life of a child. Advent invites us to show courage. To raise our heads and our voices to demand that our leaders work to end the genocide that has ravaged Sudan for over a decade. The courage of the men and women of the Sudan need not shame us, but should inspire us to demand more of our governments, more of ourselves. Would that we who have so much would show the same courage as those who have lost everything.

Advent invites us to rejoice.

We rejoice because our God keeps his promises.

We rejoice because God fulfilled a promise when He came before.

We rejoice because God will fulfill the promise when she comes again.

We rejoice because God fulfills the promise and comes to us and through us today.