

Today we begin a new Church year, we move to Year A to Year B of the three year cycle. Our masses will be slightly shorter as we read from the Gospel of Mark who has a succinct writing style, but we have to pay closer attention or we might miss his message entirely.

Today also marks the beginning of Advent, a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. During advent we remember the FIRST coming of Christ at his birth in Bethlehem, but we also focus on the SECOND coming when he returns at the end of time, to judge the people of the world. St Bernard of Clairvaux (clair vo) identified a third, ongoing coming of Christ, into our lives, each and every day. These three encounters with Christ are discussed in today's readings.

Our reading from Isaiah is a precursor to the first coming. The Israelite people are lost, yearning for the days of old when they felt closer to the Lord. They've drifted away from their faith and ask God to be more present in their lives. "Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not? Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you." I think we all have times in life when we fall out of communication with God and yearn for something dramatic to get us back on the right path.

God's response, both then and now, is the first coming of Christ. He rends the heavens, a word that means to tear open, and we see the rare presence of heavenly figures on earth. Angels deliver messages for Mary, the shepherds, and the wise men. Jesus is delivered to Mary's womb through the power of the Most High from heaven and the birth of Jesus is attended by a multitude, an army, of angles. This is the largest presence on earth of heavenly figures anywhere in the bible.

It's interesting to note that this first coming of Christ relies heavily on the faith and courage of ordinary people who carry out God's will. God has the power to do anything, but He chooses to share the glory with his servants on earth, and they accept the challenge. For example, Mary and Joseph agree to stay together as they experience an out-of-wedlock pregnancy and suffer the scrutiny of their community. After Jesus is born, they follow God's directions, become refugees in Egypt, and accept the fate of their son as a martyr who dies on the cross.

Other contributors include Zachariah and Elizabeth, who accept the role of their son, John the Baptist, as a herald of Christ rather than following in his father's tradition as Jewish priest. God also call in gentiles, the Wise Men and the Shepherds spread the word that Christ was sent to save ALL people.

So, the FIRST coming was a combined effort of God and the women and men he chose to help Him. And it worked! Many, many were, and continue to be saved! Salvation history shows that Jesus, his teachings, and the disciples changed the world. In his book, "The Rise of

Christianity,” Rodney Stark show that Christians grew to 2% of the Roman empire by the year 100, and sustained a 40% growth rate each decade for the next 200 years, growing to over 50% by the end of the 3rd century.

Moving to the 2nd coming. In the gospel, Jesus describes our responsibility for keeping his kingdom in order until He returns. In the parable, the man traveling abroad “Leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work.” Just as Mary, Joseph, and the others each played a specific role in the coming of Christ, each of us plays a role in maintaining His kingdom. The gospel says, “You do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning.” These times can be applied to the timeframes of our lives, whether we are children, young adults, middle aged, or seniors, the time to do OUR work in God’s kingdom is always NOW.

Finally, we have the 3rd coming of Christ. Peter Kreeft says about this coming, “He comes to us many times each day. He comes in each opportunity to choose him, to love him, to do HIS will by doing good to others, by sacrificing self-will for His will.”

So how do we receive Christ in his three comings during this busy Advent season?

Remembering the first coming is easy, Christmas reminders are on every corner, website and app. Remembering the second coming requires a little more effort and we have traditions that help us. Having an Advent wreath on the kitchen table reminds us to pray Advent prayers focused on preparing for Christ's return. Advent calendars are available with reflections to maintain our focus on heavenly goals. If motivation is lacking, combine your reflection calendar with a chocolate Advent calendar, just remember to do things in the right order...

How do we keep the 3rd coming, the ongoing coming of Christ in mind during this Advent season? We can start by thinking of how the chain of events that began with the FIRST coming of Christ made its way into our lives. We can consider our grandparents, parents, and other relatives, teachers, and coaches and anyone who are like the members of the Church of Corinth, praised in the 2nd reading for living Christian lives.

St. Paul says, “I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus.” We thank them not for being perfect, but for holding on to their faith during difficult times. We ask for grace to follow in their footsteps, to accept our callings as we seek to maintain the Kingdom of God handed to us through them.

Advent is a time to awaken to the magnificence of our faith. It’s a time to see with new eyes the rending of heaven and the gift of salvation that poured forth from it. To marvel at God’s power, mercy, and love present in the sending of His son in the first, second, and third coming. It’s a time to recognize the work of so many who received Christ into their hearts and gave of themselves to build His Church, and to join them in this work during the new Church year.