

Safe Passage

First Sunday of Advent
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

Sunday, November 29, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10;
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The troops were massing on the Kuwaiti border. Walking from one group of soldiers to the next, Major Halt talked to his men about the mission they were facing. He was determined to give them confidence and keep their spirits up, as they were going into battle very shortly.

The harsh, hot desert wind was at their backs as the Marines under his command wrote what could possibly be their last letters home. Just before dawn the next day, Major Halt gave the order to move out. The skies were clear as they loaded their gear into their Humvees and advanced towards the border.

Soon, however, they felt the first drops of rain that were the beginnings of a downpour. In no time at all, the rain was falling so hard and fast that they could barely see. It was only a brief reprieve; they knew they would be ordered to advance once the weather cleared. They were filled with anticipation and some concern about the future.

That's something like how it for us, is it not? Think about it. Christmas is just around the corner. Children are probably busy composing, writing and re-writing, and editing their letters to Santa. And they're probably, poor things, facing the usual questions about good behavior and cautioned about the possibility of getting nothing but a bag of coal instead of the wonderful gifts for which they hoped.

And we're all giving thought to our Christmas plans, working on our Christmas card lists and, for those of us with literary talents, drafting our Christmas letters to send to friends and family. The very air is beginning to fill with anticipation – some of it good and some of it bad.

The Gospel, as we heard it read this morning, sets a tone of such hopeful anticipation, though it's not without trepidation in view of the awesome events to come. Yet surely, this is the way to approach the Advent season. For the next four weeks, the lessons will announce the nearness of the Kingdom of God and the fulfilling of God's promises to bring justice, righteousness, and redemption. This is to be accomplished (or at least was to be accomplished, according to Jeremiah in our first lesson) by the springing up of the righteous Branch of David, and the prophecy was fulfilled in the babe born in Bethlehem.

And now, though we celebrate that birth at Christmas, in both Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians and Luke's Gospel we are promised that Jesus will come again and not perhaps all that pleasantly. What may seem less appropriate and more nerve wracking, however, is the apocalyptic end of all things to which the gospel bears witness as marking the fulfillment of the

Kingdom of God. There's no mention here of a virgin or a child, or of shepherds or of heavenly choirs, but rather the shaking of the heavens and the earth in perplexity, in fear, and in foreboding.

It's this that makes the Advent season so difficult to bear. When we would rather be singing Christmas carols and focusing on the birth of Christ, Advent calls us to the sobering announcement that the coming of the Lord is near. What's more it is God's – apart from all human calculation or designing – it's God's plan and is of such significance that the entire cosmos reverberates with the signs and circumstances of these events.

Of course, the problem for us is that the signs are alarmingly graphic and yet perplexingly vague. What is it the gospel says? "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

It was a deepening sense of foreboding that settled upon the Marines under Major Halt's command. The heavy rains and bad weather continued for days. Each morning they'd wake up totally drenched after another night with only camouflage netting for cover. It was bad enough that they had to worry about the enemy, but it now seemed that the weather was against them, as well. It was then that Major Halt prayed this prayer, "Dear God, please stop the rain and continue to protect us."

The rain, however, was unrelenting. Day after day after day it pelted down upon them. They held their position on the border, knowing that before them the enemy waited. And they all knew that, regardless of the weather, they were soon going into full-scale combat.

I guess if we take the time to think about it carefully enough, there is some anxiety, if not foreboding, for all of us as Christmas approaches. For the children, there's the very real concern as to whether or not their behavior will count against them.

I remember from my own childhood. It seemed inevitably that just on the cusp of Christmas, I got involved in something that was terribly bad and terribly wrong, and then I was left to wonder if, perish the thought, my Christmas list would be abbreviated as a result, or worse still, that Santa just might pass my house by altogether, not even bothering with a bag of coal.

For some of us, this Christmas may well be a reduced celebration because of our financial circumstances, or worse, because we've been laid off or lost our job or are facing foreclosure on our mortgage. For others there will be the relentless and inevitable pressures Christmas brings as the day draws ever closer.

But even more concerning that that is the thinking and action to which this morning's Gospel calls us, when we would much rather dismiss or ignore it. This type of "end of the world" pronouncement seems to us, at best to be farfetched, and at worst terrifying. But to respond to the gospel in such a fashion is actually to miss the real point. The point is, according to Jesus, that these signs are not to be for us a cause of terror and fear; rather beloved, they are a call to us

to be prepared for our redemption because they herald the coming of Christ, not to destroy us, but to redeem us.

You see, I like to think of it as something like being personally involved in a crisis like a fire or an accident. Such events hold their own terror, but hope and relief spring up for those involved at the sounds of approaching sirens, while the same sirens strike a note of fear and terror in the hearts of others. But for those involved in the crisis, the approaching sirens signal hope and relief by those who summoned them for help.

Just so for Major Holt and his marines. They awoke on the day of the invasion to beautiful sunny skies. As they advanced across the border, they saw an amazing sight: the torrential rain had washed away enough sand to clearly reveal a large array of metal disks planted across their path; they found themselves looking at an Iraqi minefield. It was to them an answer to prayer, but, it didn't remove the grave danger before them. All that was revealed was the possibility of picking a path through the minefield and then moving on to the armed conflict and battle that awaited them, a battle from which some of them would not return. Their mission still had to be completed.

And do you know what, beloved? Our mission has to be completed as well. Our life and Christ's return await us in the future. Hopefully, the celebration of Christmas will give us a momentary respite from all the trials and tribulations of life which we cannot escape and toward which we are inevitably headed. Nonetheless we are kept secure by the knowledge that Christ will be there for us when the time comes; that we can face the future with hope and with prayer; and that the presence of the Holy Spirit will be there to accompany and offer us ways through the minefields of life, and at the very last, at the very last, beloved, into the welcoming, saving arms of Christ. Now isn't that something to approach with hope and joyful anticipation?

Amen.