

Isa. 2:1-5; Rom. 13:11-14; Matt. 24:36-44
First Sunday of Advent

Putting on the Armor of Light*

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Good morning! I hope you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving. My husband Michael and I spent Thanksgiving this year in New York City, where Thanksgivukkah was a really big deal.

Have you heard about Thanksgivukkah? (I see some people nodding their heads.) It's a mash up between the holidays of Thanksgiving and Hanukkah. For the first time in 125 years – since 1888! – Thanksgiving and the first day of Hanukkah fell on the same calendar day.

To celebrate this once-in-a-lifetime occasion, a number of restaurants in Manhattan offered special Thanksgivukkah menus, including turkeys brined in Manischewitz wine, stuffing made from challah bread, and potato latkes served with cranberry sauce. How great is that? It reminded me of the unique partnership between Emmanuel Church and Central Reform Temple, but expressed in food.

Growing up in a first-generation Asian American immigrant household, my family also had our own hybrid Thanksgiving traditions. For example, my mom made a great stuffing using sticky rice, Chinese sausage and mushrooms, and soy sauce. It sounds a little strange, but it actually tastes great! I'd say that dish is a bit more like the partnership between Emmanuel and Spring of Boston.

This morning, I'd like to talk about another calendar mash up: the convergence of Hanukkah and the First Sunday of Advent. Today we celebrate the First Sunday of Advent, which marks the beginning of a brand new liturgical year. This year, however, the First Sunday of Advent also occurs right in the middle of the eight days of Hanukkah. I suppose we could call this convergence Adventukkah, or, if you prefer, Hanukkavent.

One theme shared by both Hanukkah and the First Sunday of Advent is that of light. Hanukkah is known as the Festival of Lights, and it celebrates the miracle of an oil lamp that burned in the Temple for eight days, even though there was only enough oil to last for a single day. In fact, this afternoon Central Reform Temple will be presenting its annual Hanukkah cantata, which is appropriately called "A Light Through the Ages."

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Light is also an important theme for the First Sunday of Advent. Today we light the first of the four candles in the Advent wreath. Our opening hymn refers to the coming of Christ when “morning dawns and light triumphant breaks.” And our collect for today urges us to put on the “armor of light.”

Today’s collect, which Pam read from the altar at the beginning of the service, is drawn from our second reading. In that reading, Paul writes to the ancient Christian community at Rome that now is the moment to “wake from our sleep” because the “day is near.” They are to “live honorably as in the day” and to “put on the armor of light.”

This reading from the Letter to the Romans actually has great historical significance. It is one of the oldest lectionary readings in the Book of Common Prayer. In fact, it was appointed for the First Sunday of Advent in the very first BCP dating back to 1549. So Anglicans and Episcopalians have been hearing about the “armor of light” on the First Sunday of Advent for over 460 years.

So what does it mean to wake up and to put on this mysterious “armor of light”? The Greek phrase used by Paul is *hopla tou photos*, which literally means “weapons” of light. In other words, Paul urges us to employ “weapons” of light in order to “lay aside the works of darkness” that threaten to engulf us all.

Interestingly, this is where the First Sunday of Advent shares another similarity with Hanukkah. Historically speaking, Hanukkah commemorates the military resistance of the Jewish people over their Syrian Greek conquerors who had suppressed their religion and desecrated their Temple. Paul’s reference to the “armor of light” is consistent with these heroic acts of resistance.

Now some of you may be uncomfortable with Paul’s use of military language, as am I. But these military references are actually a reminder that God’s power is radically different than human power. As Isaiah prophesies in our first reading, the coming of the Lord will result in a radical peace or *shalom*: people turning their weapons into tools for farming. They will beat their “swords into plowshares” and their “spears into pruning hooks.” Nations will no longer lift up weapons against each other and will no longer “learn war.”

In the same way, putting on the armor of light has little to do with traditional warfare. Rather, it has to do with *fighting indifference* in a world that is filled with suffering, cruelty, and despair. As Pope Francis noted in his Apostolic Exhortation released this past week (I can’t believe that I’m citing the pope!), what kind of a world do we live in which a two-point drop in the stock market makes the news, but not the fact that an elderly homeless person dies of exposure to the elements?

We are called to fight indifference because God fights indifference. God refuses to look the other way. The theological significance of Christmas is that God cares so much about us that God becomes one of us. Divine love takes the form of human flesh because God wants to be with us. That’s what *Emmanuel* means, after all: God with us.

Those of us who walk the path of Jesus are therefore called to put on the armor of light – that is, to *fight indifference* – throughout the year, but especially during the season of Advent.

Now, many people think of Advent simply as a four-week preparation period for Christmas, or the First Coming of Jesus Christ. Lots of decorating, eggnog, and Christmas carols. Or, in the case of my household, lots of lovely holiday-scented candles from our local Yankee Candle mall outlet. (Michael is sitting down there saying “Don’t tell them about the candles!” But we are gay men, after all.)

But Advent is more than that. It is also a period of preparation for the *Second Coming*, an eschatological event with a “day and hour” that is unknown by even the angels or Jesus himself. That is why today’s Gospel reading from Matthew is apocalyptic in nature and, frankly, rather disturbing. I suspect that most of us don’t like sitting around thinking about being swept away by floods, being snatched up while working at our jobs or preparing food, or having our houses broken into in the middle of the night.

When we hear apocalyptic descriptions of the Second Coming, as in today’s Gospel, what comes to mind? Are we obsessed with our own fate, hoping that we will not be swept away by floods as in Noah’s time? Or do we *fight indifference* by seeing the suffering right before our very eyes, such as the ten million people in the Philippines whose lives were devastated just a few weeks ago from the flooding caused by Typhoon Haiyan?

Are we paralyzed by worries of being suddenly snatched away, like the person working in the field or the woman grinding meal? Or do we *fight indifference* by recognizing those around us who suffer from unemployment, starvation, or lack of health care? This is especially significant on this December 1st, World AIDS Day, when some 35 million people still live with the HIV virus worldwide.

Are we gripped by a fear of our houses being broken into by a thief in the middle of the night? Or do we *fight indifference* by seeing the homeless in our midst, like the women who live in the shelter right underneath our feet, in the basement of our church?

Perhaps – just perhaps – the Second Coming is not only a future event, but is something that is already happening all around us. Jesus tells us in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel that we literally encounter him whenever we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. Jesus is already in our midst. We just need to wake up from our sleep.

Finally, even Johann Sebastian Bach can help us understand what it means to put on the armor of light. In the fifth part of today’s Bach cantata, we will hear a remarkable duet between the tenor and the bass. The two singers call upon God, who is love, to

“ignite” our spirits so that we can more powerfully love God and neighbor. Listen carefully to how the tenor and the bass sing the German word for ignite – *entzünde* – which is a powerful musical representation of how our souls are ignited, or set on fire, for the love of God.

So I encourage you to put on the armor of light during this season of Advent, our own festival of light. Put on the armor of light – not for violence or warfare, but for setting your soul on fire for the love of God and neighbor. Wake up, for the day is near. Fight indifference to the suffering that surrounds us. For it is precisely in that struggle, in that resistance to indifference, where you will find Christ Jesus and the Second Coming.

+Amen.