
Advents Possible and Impossible

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The First Sunday of Advent – Year A**

“I know something about impossible prophecies coming true.” Let me repeat that: “I know something about impossible prophecies coming true.” That’s one of my favorite quotes from the Jesus film series: you know—the one that I keep telling people about, because I’m so eager for everyone else to watch this state-of-the-art religious programming. The series is called “The Chosen,” and until now it’s only been available through the internet.

But this month of November “The Chosen” finally comes to movie theaters for the first time and for a third season. It’s been available for a couple of years already; available as the first production about Jesus that’s filmed as a series of episodes instead of just a two- or three-hours long movie. That means it can take the time to really explore and focus on the Bible stories that give a more authentic and compelling picture of our Lord and his significance. It’s also paid for as the largest crowd-sourced media production in history; paid for by donations from ordinary believers like you and me. That means that it does not reflect conventional Hollywood-type media values, but actual biblical values that conform to religious commitments.

Now the quotation I just shared comes from a scene in the series that involves the mother of Jesus, Mother Mary. She is responding to a question that one of the disciples asks Jesus. They are all sitting together at a meal during the feast of Tabernacles. The scene is staged with Jesus himself at table, alongside Mary his mother and a couple of other women including Mary Magdalene. Then the disciple called “big James” asks a question about a prophecy from Isaiah that is like our reading appointed for today from Isaiah. “In days to come,” the prophecy reads:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:2-3)

Now as he quotes that prophecy, Big James is astounded and asks Jesus: ‘How can this happen, that our enemies like the Romans will sit down with us like we are here today celebrating Tabernacles in this tent?’ And Jesus answers: ‘A lot of things will need to change, right?’ And that’s when Mother Mary gets a small whimsical smile on her face, as she chimes in with that remark I’ve quoted a few times already: “I know something about impossible prophecies coming true.”

Of course, in that scene I just described Mary is referring to the marvelous birth of Jesus: birthed from her own body as the long-awaited Messiah of her people. And of course, that example as a stunning case of an impossible prophecy coming true, right? It’s the prophecy that a Messiah would come in history, as a Savior coming in real-time, who would save their people from oppression and re-establish them as a free and prosperous people. That’s an equally stunning example as the scripture that we have as our Isaiah prophecy appointed for today: equally impossible for us to imagine as really happening in real-time today, isn’t it?

Well, all of us gathered here today *also* ‘know something about impossible prophecies coming true!’ Don’t we now? Yes, both in our personal lives as people of faith, and in our collective lives as fellow Americans and as world citizens. Oh yes: I have in mind the seeming impossible coming true in lots of times and places world-wide. For example, in the lifetime of some of us here today:

- There was the coming down of the Berlin Wall in Germany, something that seemed impossible at the time it happened. And for another example:
- There was the peaceable end of racial apartheid in South Africa, without a bloody race war; something that also seemed impossible at the time. And even more recently:
- There was the case of Barack Obama, a person of African descent becoming President of these United States; something that many of us here never expected to occur in our lifetime. Finally, speaking of the history of my own people:
- There are some of us here today who celebrate Juneteenth in their calendar year—that day in 1865 when some of the last enslaved people in our country learned that they were ‘free at last; free at last; thank God Almighty, free at last!’

That’s right, in particular I have special cause to believe in seeming impossible things coming true. That’s because I come from a people who were once among the most despised and unloved people on the earth; and among some people still are the among the most despised and unloved. But one day we heard a revolutionary message; a message of unconditional love for us and for all people. That message was so astonishing that we have never tired of hearing it again and again. And most of us here today have heard it too. It’s the message that St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians; the message that “there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). That’s right! And in order to keep proclaiming that message, I pray: Help me Holy Spirit to proclaim this gospel Good News here and in the world today.

Now as we’ve already acknowledged, many of us here today have heard this gospel Good News and are heralds of that Good News; the news that there is abroad in our land, and among all peoples, a love that is so unconditional that it includes all people in its embrace. Here let me conclude with just one small example, drawn from my own experience of being away from this beloved community here at St. Philip’s for the past couple of months. It’s another example of seemingly impossible things coming true. And it’s an example that is particularly related to our Cathedral parish, but one that you would not necessarily know anything about. Let me be the first to tell you.

A few months ago I was in conversation with a dear friend in Quito, Ecuador. That’s the country in South America named for its location on the equator. Quito is its capitol city high in the Andes mountain range. Its western coast has a port city on the Pacific ocean, beyond which it the Galapagos Islands where Charles Darwin conducted his research that led to his classic 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species*. By contrast is the Amazon jungle on the far eastern border. That’s the magnificent rainforest that is known as ‘the lungs of our planet,’ because of its role in absorbing 25% of the world’s carbon emissions and producing about 6% of the world’s oxygen. The Amazon is also, as many of us know, one of the most threatened environments in the world because of deforestation and over 70 thousand wildfires in 2019 alone; routine events that contribute to the climate emergency we are all facing. Finally it’s a predominately Spanish speaking country, with native languages spoken by indigenous peoples across the land.

But the phone call I received a few months ago was about my friend’s English-speaking church congregation. The church has been going through a difficult transition, because its pastor and its deacon—who is also his wife—both retired last summer. They retired after years of faithful, loving ministry at low pay, and after shepherding their people through the worst of the pandemic. But in the weeks following their retirement, the number of church members who had become so accustomed to attending services over the internet on Zoom also began to dwindle. Under lay leadership, the congregation attempted to resume in-person worship as well. But that too resulted in a disappointing level of attendance. Finally church tithing and pledging also declined. It seemed as if the church was dying and would be compelled to close its doors within a few months in the foreseeable future.

My friend began to speculate with me about the possibility of an interim clergy person visiting for just a couple of months; just a couple of months of regular, reliable preaching and pastoral oversight might just be enough; just enough, she imagined, to draw members of the congregation back to attending in-person worship in addition to boosting the online attendance. It didn’t take me long, I admit, to ask her directly, “Why aren’t you asking me to come for a couple of months?”

Now I knew more or less what I was getting myself into. Just three years before I had visited that congregation in Quito, both as a worshipper and as a visiting preacher on a couple of occasions. Enough folks there met me long enough to know that they liked me, and I liked them. But apart from all that preliminary affection, I knew enough of the history and the significance of the congregation to be highly motivated to help. Here’s what I mean. To begin with, its name is “Advent-Saint Nicholas.”

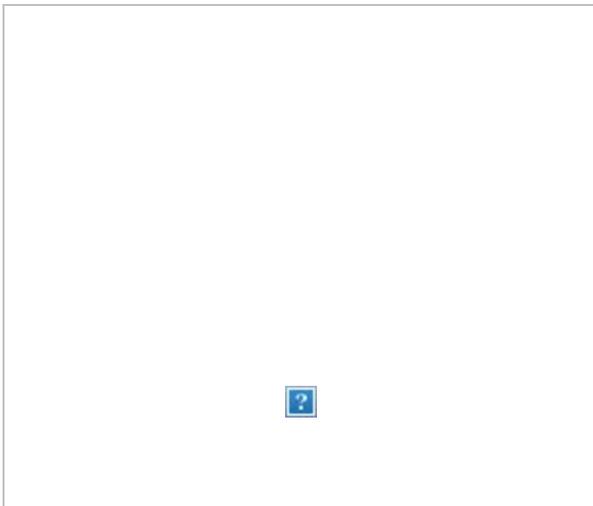
That's right, this English-speaking congregation bears the name of the very season we are celebrating on this first Sunday of Advent: the name 'advent' that means 'coming,' as in the coming of the Christ child that we celebrate at Christmas, and the coming of the new church year that also begins today. However the congregation bears a second name as well, because in the 1980s it merged as a Lutheran congregation with an Anglican congregation called "Saint Nicholas."

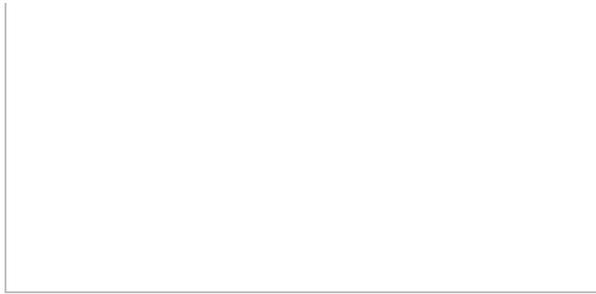
That's right: the church bears the combined name, Advent-Saint Nicholas; with that latter name deriving from the 4th century Greek bishop whose persona gave rise to our Christmas figure of Santa Claus. Yes, Bishop Nicholas became a saint, and then morphed into our jolly 'Saint Nick' because of his famous habit of secret gift giving; giving gifts to people without revealing his identity as their bishop. Moreover his feast day also occurs during this same Advent season, because he died on December 6 in the year 343 in our common era; December 6 coming up just a week and a couple of days from today. And so the very name and origin of this congregation, Advent-Saint Nicholas, signifies such new beginnings and generous self-giving. Indeed, that name conveys such a history of generosity and renewed beginnings that it would be a great sadness for its existence to end unnecessarily.

But that is only a part of the story of Advent-St. Nicholas or ASN. As an English-speaking congregation ASN also became a participating member of an umbrella organization composed of two other congregations: one of them Spanish-speaking and the other German-speaking. That combination of relationships makes ASN an ecumenical jewel among congregations in the universal body of Christ. Moreover in the United States, where many ASN members have roots as so-called 'ex-pats,' ASN's Lutheran and Anglican or Lutheran and Episcopal combination of identities is well regarded, so much so that we are known for sharing both liturgies and clergy like me on an official basis.

Now completely apart from these rich connections and independently of ASN, in 1998 our own Cathedral parish, as reported in our Cathedral Times issue of January 11, 1998, conducted a couple of church building mission trips to another parish in or near Quito, a parish called Buen Pastor, or Good Shepherd. But now, let's fast forward to a couple of months ago, when I heard myself say to my friend, "Why aren't you asking me to come for a couple of months?" And indeed, as I sought the help of our Cathedral to grant me leave and to support this venture, it has seemed providential and even irresistible for us to join our resources to the legacy of that fragile congregation trying to reconcile differences among people of diverse languages and backgrounds. So we have a combined opportunity here at St. Philip's in Atlanta, as a sister congregation of ASN in Quito, to contemplate new beginnings, new advents, and generous church outreach and church giving alongside other communities of the people of God. As the universal church in all lands likewise prepares to observe renewal in the coming church year, we also need this opportunity to observe renewal in the coming church year.

Thus I invite us all, both individually and as the body of Christ convened in this place, to the observance of a holy Advent season. Among all the ways we can do this, I offer us here today that ancient prophecy of Isaiah; that prophecy in which the very things that seem impossible to us, are the very things that God is able to achieve and is in real-time achieving. In the words of Ephesians chapter three: these are 'things far beyond all that we can ask or imagine,' things that God is achieving, 'through the power at work within us . . . to the glory of God in the church and throughout all generations.'





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Yes, church family and friends of Christ:

In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

[Dear people of God],
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!

Amen. (Isaiah 2:1-5)