
Grace to Cast Away Works of Darkness

A sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith
Advent 1C

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and redeemer. (Ps. 9.1) Amen!

At last, it's the beginning of Advent! The word, *advent*, means 'coming,' and the 'e-vent' that's coming is one of the most glorious times of the Christian year: the Nativity of Christ, or Christmas, the birth of the Christ-child. This is season from the four weeks of Advent to the twelve days of Christmas and the luminous weeks of Epiphany—that's one of the most popular and meaningful seasons in the church year.

That sequence begins with our Collect for today, the opening prayer appointed for this first Sunday in Advent. You may find it printed there at the top of your scripture sheet, or on the front of the service leaflet, or in the Book of Common Prayer, page 211. Let's pray it again, together this time. Please find it now, or look on with your neighbor: our opening prayer for the first Sunday of Advent.

Once again, 'The Lord be with you! . . . [And also with you.] Let us pray.'

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Now let's notice, right away, the emphasis on "grace;" right up front in this Collect. *Grace* is a small word with big meaning in Christian theology. But here I want to highlight it with a joke; a simple joke about what it takes to get into heaven. It's called "Heavenly Rates," and I wish I had found this one a few semesters ago, when I taught a course on religion and the economy; my college course at Emory University. The joke is about how much you've earned or merited in order to rate getting into heaven. What is your 'net worth,' as we say nowadays; your net worth in good deeds that will qualify you for getting to heaven.

Now Christian friends, we know that this is not our theology of the afterlife! We Protestants call *that* kind of theology the false theology of earning your way to heaven: 'works righteousness.' On the contrary, we believe that we are 'saved by grace, through faith.' Right? Okay! But this is just a joke, okay? Just a joke!

Imagine that you die and find yourself at the entrance to heaven. Of course, St. Peter meets you at the pearly gates. St. Peter welcomes you and then announces the entrance fee.

"Now here's how it works," he says. "You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the person says, "I was married to the same person for 50 years and never cheated on them, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points!"

"Only three points, you say. Oh well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithes and service."

"Terrific!" says St. Peter, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point! Golly. How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," says St. Pete.

"TWO POINTS!!" you almost shout. "That's just six points so far! At this rate the only way I will get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

And that's when St. Peter says, "You got that right. Come on in!" [Adapted from:

<http://blog.beliefnet.com/watchwomanonthewall/2011/06/jokes-it-takes-a-100-points-to-get-to-heaven.html>]

That's right: exactly right! That's our Christian theology of grace. And that's what distinguishes our theology of eternal life in heaven from the ordinary belief in immortality. All kinds of traditions and philosophies believe in immortality; that the soul is immortal and survives death in order to go on to an afterlife. But Christian theology proclaims a more robust eternal life—not a natural immortality that's automatic; that happens no matter what. But a "gift" of eternal life as co-heirs with Christ—based on our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

And we also claim something more robust in terms of what we'll be doing and being in afterlife with Christ. Not just persisting as disembodied souls. Rather the scriptures prophesy that we'll be triumphant with Christ; triumphing over the cosmic forces of death and destruction, and reigning with Christ in the heavenly places—whatever all that means! That's what St. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15. Using the image or symbol of "sowing" seeds—the way a gardener or farmer plants seeds in the soil of the earth—St. Paul teaches that the deeds we accomplish in our bodies during this life create a kind of seed that will germinate in this life but only come to fruition in our afterlife. This is how he says it:

you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body . . .

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Cor. 15:37-38, 42-44)

Christian friends, on this first Sunday in Advent, 2012—twelve years into the third millennium of our Lord, I'm grieved to make for us a collective confession; a confession on behalf of all human beings alive today. Collectively as a human family we are indeed "sowing in dishonor." And I make this collective confession today because Advent is both a penitential season and a joyous one: repenting so that in four weeks we may rightly rejoice in the coming of the Christ-child.

Thus these first Sundays of Advent start out more penitential than joyous. And thus, in order to get to the joy we must navigate the penitence. For this purpose St. Paul's teaching, about "sowing" our mortal bodies in "weakness" and "dishonor," is the right scripture for us today. In particular, in this waning year of 2012, I find five areas in which we human beings need collective repentance because of sowing our physical bodies in weakness and dishonor.

Beginning with our physical bodies, the number one issue for me today is human trafficking; sex trafficking the bodies of our women and children that is a global trade in the world today. As an African American (and as you might imagine) I am struck by the fact that this kind of human slavery persists in the world when our own country fought so hard—and lost so much—in order to abolish slavery here and end the slave trade. How can it be that this trafficking in human lives is even growing in the world today, contributing the gross national product of so many—too many countries? But this shameful practice is even a local scandal here in our own city, where a businessman in Chicago can take a flight to Atlanta in the

morning, get a teenager, and be back home for dinner in the evening. Mayor Shirley Franklin put such men "on notice" during her tenure as mayor, by publicizing a "Dear John" letter; that the city will vigorously prosecute this crime. But such dishonor for our humanity persists both globally and locally.

Second for me is the crisis in Middle East, between Israel and the Palestinians. Just in the news again this past week, we hear that recent progress has been made toward creating a two-state solution in that situation. Nevertheless, I always remember the laconic remark made by a journalist several years ago. With wry humor he joked that the Middle East features, "the world's most stable crisis." What he meant of course is that it's always there! You can count on it "two years from now or twenty years from now it'll still be there; whatever your foreign policy you can plan on it" guaranteed.

But joking aside, because there are so many lives at stake, what most grieves me is our human inability to actually choose peace in that situation. At every turn the parties to the conflict seem to be determined to keep the conflict alive "to seize war out of the jaws of peace." Just when it seems that "the roadmap to peace" is being well traveled we hear to the contrary, "No, there's *this* new reason to keep the conflict going," or "*that* new reason." To our dishonor it seems we human beings in that situation actually want or need to keep the conflict going, rather than sincerely seeking to choose peace in the Middle East.

The situation may be the same with the third case I to which I refer almost in passing: the case of human poverty in the global south; the fact that still in the 21st century, everywhere we look around the globe in the southern hemispheres there is disproportionate poverty, hunger and deprivation. It's geographically remarkable, isn't it? "the north-south divide that is not only a global feature of our civilization but even local, here in Atlanta for instance.

My wife Vida sometimes teases me by joking that because I work at the Cathedral here in Buckhead and teach at Emory in North Druid Hills that I'm living life on the northside while she has to settle with life on the southside. Oh well, thank God for humor! But perhaps one day we as a civilization will do better at distributing our collective wealth, and distributing our public services and our abundant resources both globally and locally.

Now I turn to the fourth case of our collective dishonor. Here again I suspect that we are incapable collectively of turning these situations around through our own efforts. Instead we seem to be living-out the biblical truth, contrary to conventional wisdom, that "God helps those who *can't* help themselves!" For in so many of the situations I'm describing today we seem too weak to help ourselves get out of the situation we find ourselves in. "Sowing in weakness," to quote St.

Paul again, our hope is that the grace of God will raise us "in power."

Consider the fourth case that I highlight here. It's the latest report on our country's use of torture and other human rights violations in the so-called, "war on terrorism." President Jimmy Carter has called attention to these matters in a recent statement that chastises our current administration for its "Cruel and Unusual Record."

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/opinion/americas-shameful-human-rights-record.html>]

In particular Pres. Carter points not only to our continued use of torture, but also to our increasing use of a new tactic: using drone airplanes to bomb targets thousands of miles away in Afghanistan or Pakistan. It is inevitable, of course, that we are killing civilian women and children in these drone warfare attacks. The reports describe ordinary people's experience of having their skies poisoned by these flying machines, not knowing when or where death will be raining down on them from above minutes after hearing a plane approaching overhead. Meanwhile the drones themselves are operated by people sitting comfortably at a computer terminal somewhere in Virginia or some other remote location, watching as if playing a video game with human lives while their targets are eliminated from the sky.

Now, on the one hand I'm concerned that one day terrorist groups or enemy nations will be send drone aircraft over our skies here at home. On the other hand I wonder about those operators who are piloting the drones by remote control. One day, when they learn the human cost of so many innocent lives lost forever, will they be as traumatized as the pilots who dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki more than a half-century ago?

Well, I'm already disturbed knowing that my tax dollars are going to support such engines of death against my will. But also I wonder if this is another area in which we are helpless to reverse course as a nation, and can only throw ourselves on the grace of God to help because we can't help ourselves. In this case we seem incapable of forestalling a future apocalypse that will create the kind of scenario we read in our gospel appointed for today, what some call an "objective apocalypse" or

"apocalypse now."

Finally there is the fifth case: the case of our global ecology that has claimed our attention recently with the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. Now I'm fully aware that some of us believe that global warming is real, while others think it is a misguided exaggeration by too many scientists colluding with too many activists. What strikes me most about it, however, is our inability as a family of nations to do anything decisively about it *even if it were real!* To describe this inability or international impotence, one ecologist has borrowed a phrase from a now popular writer; perhaps the best myth-maker of the 20th century: the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien's phrase is "the long defeat," and it has been applied by ecologist and social activist Paul Farmer to our collective powerlessness in the following way.

"I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I actually think sometimes we may win. I don't dislike victory. . . . We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the [needy and the] losers, no, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat."

And that's the phrase the way that Farmer uses it. Now one commentator on his writing thought that Farmer got the phrase from a philosopher; the French philosopher of existentialism, Albert Camus. And there is a related connection, and it would be a great topic for another day! [See Camus' classic essay on the "myth of Sisyphus": <http://philwiki.wetpaint.com/page/Myth+Of+Sisyphus+-+Albert+Camus>]

But that's not right: [Farmer got the phrase] from . . . his favorite book: *The Lord of the Rings* [where Tolkien writes:] "Through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat." And Tolkien himself, in letters, adopted and endorsed the phrase: "I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' " though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory."
www.theamericanscene.com/2008/10/13/the-long-defeat

"Some samples or glimpses of final victory" that, Christian friends, is what we have in today's Advent scriptures: "samples and glimpses of final victory." That's what our scriptures are about, appointed for this first Sunday of Advent, 2012. It's there in our Old Testament lesson from the Book of Jeremiah, where we heard the prophet declare:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.
In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.
In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." (Jer. 33.14-16)

There it is, Christian friends: in all the places where we are "fighting the *long defeat*," where because of our weakness and to our shame and dishonor we human beings are collectively not able to help ourselves: "The Lord is our righteousness!" Yes, this is where "God helps those who *can't* help themselves: by coming to us as a messiah, "the righteous Branch sprung up from David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

And most importantly for us Christians, that's what our gospel is all about, appointed for this first Sunday of Advent, 2012:

"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.
Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.
Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21.25-28)

Yes, in the midst of "distress among nations" and "people fainting from fear and foreboding" what Tolkein called our "long defeat," Jesus himself prophesied that seeing these things take place we are to "stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.'

Perhaps right here is a final reason why Advent is also a penitential season. It's got something to do with preparing us to experience the joy of the "first coming' of Christ as the Christ-child, with the same expectancy that we hear about in today's gospel announcing the "second coming' of Christ as the "Son of Man.' For the reason we are to "stand up and raise our heads' is so that we won't miss what Tolkein called "some samples or glimpses of final victory."

Therefore, today's gospel concludes, therefore:

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21.34-36)

And so our Advent hope is that this season will fortify us to be "standing up' and watching for "samples and glimpses of final victory,' and not be distracted or defeated by gratifications, addictions, or life's worries. And to lighten our hearts, my sisters and brothers, let me end with another joke about heaven to complement the joke I told earlier. This one is actually an interfaith joke, and could even include humanists, agnostics and atheists, although it begins with the classic entrance at heaven's gate where St. Peter stands waiting to let us in with his keys to the kingdom.

A man dies and goes to heaven. Saint Peter meets him at the gates and takes him on a tour. They enter a long hall with doors lining either side of it.

Saint Peter opens the first door they come to they see the Hindus reading the Rig-Veda. The next door they open they see the Buddhists reading the The Diamond Sutra. In the next room contains people of various Islamic faiths reading the Qur'an, and the next has Catholics reading the Bible.

Then they pass a door that Peter doesn't open. This rouses the man's curiosity and he asks, "Who is in that room, sir?"

"Well," Peter replies, "that is the room with all the people who think they're the only ones in heaven. You don't want to go in there." [Adapted from: www.mormonwiki.com/Mormon_jokes]

Christian friends, after all the prophecies are fulfilled and our gospel message has the final victory, what we claim to be true is that our God is a generous and gracious God. And as a God of grace and mercy he is not a God who excludes people or turns anyone away from fulfillment and bliss. Rather, this is the God who helps those who can't help themselves; and that includes you and me, and all our fellow human beings; all of us as we collectively fall into weakness and dishonor, and nonetheless continue to fight what can often seem like "the long defeat.'

Nevertheless, may we find this grace to be real and true for us in Advent season: the grace that we prayed for in our Collect appointed for today"

grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which [our Lord and Savior] Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with [the Father] and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. [www.bcponline.org]

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