

## THE LAST SUNDAY

A Sermon for the Sunday Next before Advent, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

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There are many kinds of time. Three of them are: Man's Time, God's Time, and something in between, that for the moment, I'll call "Church Time". What I mean by these different kinds of time is something on the order of a calendar. Most of these calendars have problems. Of course, God's calendar doesn't have any problems, but we don't really know what it looks like.

Man's Time, or calendar, in many instances has some sort of religious connection as well as a connection to astronomy. Obviously, the first thing that was noticed was a day, as a period of time from one sunrise to the next. The changing of the appearance of the moon gave them a longer period of time that seemed to be regular, and then there was the cycle of the seasons that coincided with the changing of the stars in the night sky. One idea about the Magi who came to see Jesus is that they were astronomers. Of course, God gave us the idea of the week in, "Exodus 20:9-10 **“9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: 10 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work”**

Many people including the Jews came up with a calendar based on the lunar month. There is a problem with all such calendars, and that is that we humans want to be able to count things on calendars in whole numbers, integers. We want the year to be exactly 365 days, and it's not. The idea of the *month* was dreamed up by humans and it is based on the cycle of the moon, Once upon a time, the word that meant month in English was spelled, M•O•O•N•E•T•H. Even with rather coarse observations this idea of a month has a problem: namely that it takes two lunar cycles for the moon to come back to something close to where it was relative to the time of

day. It turns out that the lunar month is very close to being 29.5 days, so 12 of those months would be only 354 days. We might like for the month to be exactly 30 days, which doesn't work either because 12 of those months is 360 days.

Even the year causes trouble. Early astronomers could see that the year was about 365 days long plus a bit. Lunar calendars fell 11 days short; 30-day calendars were off by 5 days; and both of those were off, by an extra little bit, which every four years causes us to have to add a "leap day" to the calendar in February. The Romans had a 365 day calendar for over 400 years that had gotten so far out of whack by the time of Julius Caesar that he decreed a new system in 46 BC, the one in which a leap day was added to the end of February every four years. This was fine for a while, but after about 1600 years, the calendar was lagging behind the real world by a full 10 days. It took a decree from Pope Gregory III in 1572 to get that problem cleaned up. It is still not perfect, but the calendar we use today is called the Gregorian calendar.

Along with this process of developing the secular calendar with many of the months named after Roman gods came the development of the church calendar. Immediately, there were problems with determining when to celebrate Easter because its date was tied to the date of the Passover, which is determined by the Jewish lunar calendar. The early Christians celebrated only 3 feast days: Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter; but it was not long before the feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost were added to the calendar, and then Lent and Advent. It took a while for Advent to become what it is now: The time that starts with the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday before Christmas and ends on the day before Christmas. With the full development of the Church calendar as we have it today, this Sunday is always the last Sunday of the Christian year; it is thus the beginning of the last week of the Christian year. The question is, what is the significance, if any, of the last Sunday of the Christian year? Is there something special we should celebrate or learn today?

The Propers are our starting point, but I intend to go a little farther than they do. Both the OT lesson and the Epistle are taken from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Having the Epistle lesson come from the OT happens only for two Sundays during the year; this is one of them. The other is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas, for which the starred OT lesson, from Micah, is not from the same book as the Epistle which is from Isaiah. Today, these two lessons work together to give us a prophecy that makes complete sense in the light of all that is in the New Testament.

The “backsliding children” of God, the Jews are all of the tribes of Israel, of Judah and Benjamin who remained in the south and of the other 10 tribes who went to the north and disappeared, probably by assimilation and intermarriage with the residents of the north who worshipped Baal in fertility cults. If you will read the first 13 verses of this chapter before the beginning of our lesson, you will see that the entire chapter is an instruction from God to all of them to repent of their sinfulness, much of which was sexual, and to return to a reunion with God and the other tribes. When we get to the beginning of our lesson, J. A. Thompson tells us that verses 14 and 15 are a short poem in Hebrew, and in it God is calling to his people, the children of Israel in words with double meanings that imply that God’s relation to them is the same as Jesus’ relationship to His Church – that He is Bridegroom and they, collectively are the bride. Then, in verse 16, we are given a prophecy, an oracle, that takes on more meaning in the light of the Epistle lesson. Verse 16 says: Jeremiah 3:16 **16 And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, declares the LORD, they shall no more say, "The ark of the covenant of the LORD." It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again.** The Ark did disappear sometime during OT times, whether before or after the time of Jeremiah, no one is really sure. To Jeremiah and the people of his time, the Ark was the symbol of the Jewish religion; it was the centerpiece in the Holy of Holies. From our point

of view, about 2600 years later, the Ark has no symbolic significance. For us the symbol of true religion is the Cross, but we realize that it is only a symbol that does not fully represent the Gospel, because the Gospel is better represented by an empty tomb with neatly folded grave clothes. But once we have read the book of Revelation, we know that an even better symbol is the New Jerusalem that is described in Revelation, chapters 21 and 22.

In verse 17, Jeremiah is speaking to the Jews of his day, around 600 BC when in verses 17 and 18, he says: Jeremiah 3:17-18 **17 At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart. 18 In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers for a heritage.**

Did you notice that in this passage, God says that **all nations shall gather in Jerusalem!** That's **all** nations, not just all of the 12 tribes of Israel

Now, let's follow this with the Epistle lesson, Jeremiah 23:5-8, in which the first two verses say: Jeremiah 23:5-6 **5 "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"** In the light of what we already know, this is an obvious prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ. The next two verses tell us of the blessings of his reign: Jeremiah 23:7-8 **7 "Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when they shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' 8 but 'As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north**

**country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land."**

And where is their own land, here on the old earth, or in the New Jerusalem? Jeremiah has given us a prophecy of how things will be in the last times, on the New Earth.

What does this and the rest of the Propers mean for us on this day, the Sunday Next Before Advent? Here we are in Church Time in Man's Time. For us today, Church time is more important than Man's Time. The Sunday Next Before Advent is the first day of the last week of the Christian year because the Christian year always begins on the First Sunday in Advent, which is the first of the four Sundays before Christmas.

We have looked at some of this before – of trying to answer the question: What does the Christian year do for us? We have seen that the major events in the life of Jesus are compressed between His Birth and His Ascension and that those are bracketed by some seasons on which we pray, meditate, and fast in order to prepare ourselves to commemorate those events. Ten days after the Ascension we observe Pentecost on which we begin a study of the beginnings of the Church. After Pentecost we have about 6 months in which we study more of the events of Jesus' life, His miracles and His teachings before we come back to this last week of the year. The question then really is: What should we do with this day and this week? Let me direct your attention to the Collect for today, which says: *Stir up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by Thee be plenteously rewarded, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.* It is my intention in the next few minutes to get you stirred up. I am not here to make you comfortable; I am here to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Who, I think if He were here would make us all uncomfortable. I have no illusions that would make me think I might be exempt from that discomfort.

Each year in a person's life is a battle against sin and evil. In the military, after each battle, there is an assessment that tries to answer these questions: What did we do right? What did we do wrong? What lessons did we learn? So here is your assignment for the rest of the week: Try to answer those three questions in regard to your spiritual battles and your spiritual life. Take an inventory of the state of your soul. Realizing that most people think they are nicer and more righteous than God thinks they are, ask yourself: Have I done more than just be good this past Church year? Have I come to church regularly? Have I read my Bible regularly? Have I done any good works? Have I fed the hungry? Have I clothed the naked, or otherwise helped the poor? Have I held a grudge and failed to forgive someone? Have I cursed and used foul language? Where have I fallen down from what God wants me to be? Where have I done anything good? Am I righteous? Do you think you have been righteous? Do you remember what St. Paul said in Romans 3:10-11 [10 as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God.](#) At least, no one does that on his own without the help of the grace that God gives him. As the Collect says, " forasmuch as without Thee, we are not able to please Thee" This is simply the doctrine of grace applied to those who are afflicted with Original Sin, which happens to be all of us.

In this last week of the Christian year, we should take an inventory of the state of our souls. The question is not Was I bad? or Was I good? this past year. After all those questions I read a minute ago, the question you need to be asking is simply this: Am I better at the end of this Church year than I was at the end of last year. Have I progressed? Have I made any more progress in that process of sanctification? Sanctification is the process of becoming sanctified, of becoming holy. That process will not end until we die, and it will not be completed until we are resurrected on the Last Day, when, as St. Paul says, 1 Corinthians 15:52 [52 in a moment, in](#)

the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. St. John confirms this in 1 John 3:2 2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is. To become holy should be our goal, but we won't reach it even at the last day unless we decide that our treasure is in heaven and not on earth.

Taking inventory is something all businesses have to do to stay profitable. With computers nowadays, businesses now take inventory every time a sale is made or something is bought. Taking inventory of our souls is something we need to do from time to time in order to stay spiritually healthy. The last week of the Church year is a good time to begin doing this. Then you may learn that if you take the inventory more often, you will be able to say more often that you are farther along that road of sanctification than you were at the previous inventory. Consider what you would think if it turned out that the last day of this last week of the church year turned out to be the Last Day of all time. Take a spiritual inventory this last week of this year and learn what you need to do and be to become the person God wants you to become. In the long run, it will profit your soul.

AMEN!