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December 1, 2024—First Sunday of Advent  
Officiant – **The Ven. Stephen McClatchie, Ph.D**  
Archdeacon, Episcopal Office

Jeremiah 33.14-16; Psalm 25.1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3.9-13; Luke 21.25-36

## Sermon

+ *In Nomine*

arkness and snow descend.” So begins the first section of W. H. Auden’s *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (1944), an epic poem of some fifteen hundred lines over fifty-two pages.<sup>1</sup> The title *For the Time Being* itself points to something fundamental about Christianity itself: that we have already been saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ but *For the Time Being* we are still awaiting the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. In some ways, it also speaks into the situation here in Sarnia, where the Holy Spirit and the Bishop are calling you into something new. But *For the Time Being* here you are: you know that at least one church has been sold, the future of the others has not yet been revealed, and, still, you are worshipping here together in hope and trust that *he who has promised is faithful*.

The first section of Auden’s poem is entitled “Advent” and that first line is used as a refrain amidst increasingly dark images. “Winter completes an age ... The prophet’s lantern is out / And gone the boundary stone, / Cold the heart and cold the stove, / Ice condenses on the bone: Winter completes an age” (349-50). Auden continues with images of Sin and Death that seem entirely apt for our day too: “... We are afraid / Of pain but more afraid of silence; for no nightmare / Of hostile objects could be as terrible as this Void. / This is the Abomination. This is the wrath of God” (352). I think that Auden’s words speak to our time, right now. We look around the world and see wars and a climate crisis. We recoil from the terrible discoveries and truths emerging from the enduring evils of the residential schools system. We sit amidst a rise in populist movements that thrive on sowing chaos and disorder and increasing divisions between the haves and the have nots. Does it not feel sometimes as if God is distant? Or is it we that have distanced ourselves? “Cold the heart and cold the stove, / Ice condenses on the bone: Winter completes an age.”

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1991), 348-400.

There is a Chorus at the very centre of the first section of the poem.

Alone, alone, about a dreadful wood  
Of conscious evil runs a lost mankind,  
Dreading to find its Father lest it find  
The Goodness it has dreaded is not good:  
Alone, alone, about our dreadful wood (352).

Notice how “a” wood changes to “our” wood in the last line—it is we who are lost, we who feel these things. Auden goes on to speak of our modern alienation from a distant or even absent God before a final stanza that summarises the dilemma of humanity, caught in a web of Sin and Death that we cannot escape:

We who must die demand a miracle,  
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,  
The Infinite become a finite fact?  
Nothing can save us that is possible:  
We who must die demand a miracle (353).

These are really appropriate ideas and images for today, the first Sunday of Advent. There is an open-eyed realness about Advent, isn't there? Something about its themes, when we really dig into them, that makes us want to avert our gaze and give in instead to the insistent demands of the secular holiday season—cultural Christmas if you will. Either that or find refuge in a child-like sentimentality—or is it nostalgia?—that treats Advent as if it were only about the first coming of Jesus: His birth in a stable in Bethlehem long, long ago. To do this is in some ways to indulge in a form of play acting or a game of pretend, as if Jesus had not already been born, lived, was crucified and died, and rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven.

But the season of Advent looks two ways: backwards and forwards. As we look back and reflect upon the great mystery of the Incarnation, we look toward Jesus' second coming to judge the quick and the dead, of which we hear in today's Gospel. As S. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote in the earliest centuries of the Church:

We do not preach only one coming of Christ, but a second as well, much more glorious than the first. The first was marked by patience; the second will bring the crown of a divine kingdom. In general, whatever relates to our Lord Jesus Christ has two aspects. There is a birth from God before the ages, and a birth from a virgin at the fulness of time. There is a hidden coming, like that of rain on fleece,

and a coming before all eyes, still in the future. ... We then look beyond the first coming and await the second..<sup>2</sup>

And here we sit For The Time Being, in the words of Auden's title. This in-between space is a hard place to be in—you know that very well here in Sarnia. There are many things that we do not, cannot, know yet; so much just does not make sense in culture, in society, and in the Church itself. In the face of injustice, cruelty, and need, how often do you feel that Something Must Be Done? Well, this is precisely God's response to the principalities and powers of this world, to Sin, and to Death; this is the very rationale of the Cross. And this is why the Last Judgement is actually profoundly comforting—and indeed hopeful—read as the final fulfilment of God's promise to renew all Creation after having already reconciled the world to Him in Christ. Something has been done. And something will be done. But for The Time Being, here we are. For the Time Being, we live in Christian hope.

Looking forward in anticipation and being prepared for what is to come are both key themes of Advent—and I am not talking about doing your Christmas shopping and baking. *Stand up and raise your heads, S. Luke tells us, because your redemption is drawing near. ... Be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. ... 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.*

*This* is Advent. In fact, if you think about it, all of Christian life is Advent.

“Nothing can save us that is possible / We who must die demand a miracle.”

And amazingly and wonderfully, this miracle has already happened, although not everyone knows it yet. It has taken place. In the first coming of Jesus, born in a manger in Bethlehem, the “Infinite [has] become a finite fact,” as Auden puts it and as the prophets foretold.

The prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament, which are often expressed in poetic images and figures, also often signal the two comings of Christ (and the already/not yet aspect of our faith): not only do they point toward Jesus, they also point toward His final fulfilment of what is prophesied. And For The Time Being, here we are. Take the

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<sup>2</sup> S. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. Instr.* 15, 1-3; in *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Office of Readings for the First Sunday in Advent 1.

prophet Jeremiah, for example, in today's first reading: *The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil 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.* This branch is also foretold by Isaiah, who prophesies that *A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots* (Is 11.1). Jesus as the righteous branch is linked to the justice and righteousness of the promised Messiah: *For a child has been born for us ... He will establish and uphold [his kingdom] with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore* (Is 9.6-7). Already we have the righteous branch but For The Time Being do not yet we see the promised kingdom of justice and righteousness.

“Nothing can save us that is possible / We who must die demand a miracle.”

The language of the “stock” or “stem” of Jesse, out of which will spring the shoot and the branch, carries with it the suggestion of something dead or inert, out of which emerges the miracle of life. Think of a garden in winter; it is a hopeful image and, in this case, literally life giving. For the Jesse is the father of King David and the shoot is none other than the Blessed Virgin Mary, herself of the tribe of David, out of whom the Righteous Branch will spring, Jesus the Christ.

But what does all of this mean for us, here, today? Scripture's righteous Branch and Auden's wintery Advent come together in some lines from a poem by Malcom Guite that suggest a way of being For the Time Being:

[...] Now we have need of you, forgotten Root [...]  
For now is winter, now is withering  
Unless we let you root us deep within,  
Under the ground of being, graft us in.<sup>3</sup>

Notice that, unlike with Auden's “Winter completes an age,” Guite's winter is conditional: “*unless we let you root us deep within, / Under the ground of being.*” For The Time Being, during this season of Advent and beyond, we must allow Jesus the Root, the Righteous Branch, into the very depths of our being. Notice the agency here: He does the rooting, not us. It is He who grafts us in. This Advent, stay close to Jesus and pray

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012), 9.

that you by His grace you may be more deeply rooted and grafted into Himself, Christ, the Righteous Branch.

Guite's inspiration for his sonnet was one of the ancient 0 Antiphons that are prayed towards the end of Advent; the ambiguous temporality of its ending situates us firmly in the In Between, in the unending Advent of our Christian faith. Let us pray:

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;  
before you kings will shut their mouths,  
to you the nations will make their prayer:  
Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

*Amen.*

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