



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The First Sunday in Advent, November 27th, 2011

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Today is the First Sunday in Advent – the season that culminates in the happiest feast day in the Church Year: the birthday of our Lord Jesus' Christ. In view of this, it might seem a bit weird that the seasonal color is purple or violet – the color of penitence and mourning. White, symbolic of purity and joy everlasting, would on the surface of things seem to be a more appropriate Advent color.

Joy, however, isn't exactly the emotion Christians are expected to feel during Advent. It's a season for looking forward, rather than backward. We aren't awaiting the coming of a baby Jesus in swaddling clothes -- the First Century AD equivalent of Huggies. The event we are anticipating is Jesus Christ's coming "in glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead."

Jesus warns us in St. Luke's Gospel (*Chap 21: 25-33*) we shall lift up our eyes and see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.' This time it won't be gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This time it will be Christ the King -- the Judge who separates the sheep from the goats, telling the ungodly: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels . . ." (*Matt. 25:41b.*)

It is a terrifying prospect, but Jesus has given us plenty advice about how to prepare for it. There is, for instance, the parable of the wise and

foolish virgins. The five wise virgins and the five foolish ones symbolize all of us Christians. The bridegroom, of course, is Christ – and his arrival at the Wedding Feast, late and unexpected, represents his First and his Second Coming. The Last Judgment is represented by his entry to the Wedding Feast.

The five wise brides maids, ready and waiting for him with their lamps burning, are admitted to the party. But the foolish virgins, who had to dash off to the store because they'd forgotten to bring oil for their lamps, are locked outside in the cold. His point is: Just being a Christian isn't enough. Passively espousing Christianity won't pass the final muster. Jesus demands that we live our faith.

Actually, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins is part of a long discourse on "the end times" – the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. And every occasion he raises the subject, Jesus delivers the same message: Just like his First Coming, his Second Coming will take us all by surprise. For this reason, we would be wise to live as though we were expecting it at any moment.

It's the message of the men in the field and the women at the mill. It's the message of the master of the house and the thief. It's the message of the faithful servant and the evil servant. It's the message of the Parable of the Talents. It is a

message that Jesus repeats so often that even folks with a mere passing acquaintanceship with the Scriptures shouldn't have the slightest trouble grasping it.

Even so, the Second Coming will take us by surprise because of our readiness to rationalize away the most obvious of warnings. It simply is human nature – as you can see in today's Communion Gospel – St. Luke's account of events leading up to the birth of John the Baptist.

If anybody should have been prepared for Jesus' First Coming, it was John the Baptist's father, a high respected elderly clergyman called Zacharias. Zacharias was at the pinnacle of a long career in the Jewish priesthood. His rank was roughly equivalent that of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

He was the senior member of the 24 courses of priests, set up by King David. Each course in strict rotation, served at the Temple in Jerusalem for a period of one week every six months and it was Zacharias' turn to make the offering on the Altar of Incense – an offering a priest could make only once in his life.

The incense offering was the most sacred ritual at the Temple. It was even more sacred than the blood sacrifices burnt at the Altar of the Burnt Offering, just outside the sanctuary on the Temple Porch. The Altar of Incense was right inside the sanctuary of the Temple. It stood directly in front of the vast curtain veiling the Holy of Holies. The incense was burnt on a solid gold altar and symbolized God's acceptance of Israel's prayers. It was the equivalent of our Eucharist.

On this day, Zacharias followed a ritual that had been established for almost 1,000 years. He entered the Holiest Holies, swiftly threw the incense on to the altar and intoned a prayer for the Coming of the Kingdom of God; a prayer for the Coming of the Messiah. Suddenly ritual became reality. No sooner had Zacharias uttered the ancient formula than the Archangel Gabriel

materialized on the right hand side of the Altar.

"Fear not, Zacharias," he said, "for thy prayer is heard. Thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John . . . he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And he shall go before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

It was the greatest honor a Jew could hope for. So what was Zacharias' response? Hallelujah? Glory be? Hosanna in the highest? Not on your life! St. Luke tells us Zacharias was outraged. "Why are you saying this to me?" he demanded, "I am an old man and my wife is well on in years, too. We're much too old for this."

Zacharias was a top Bible scholar. He knew scripture backwards – and every word spoken by Gabriel spoke was a direct quote from the fourth chapter of the Book of the Prophet Malachi, as book as popular in its day as the Book of Revelation today. It is impossible to believe Zacharias failed to recognize what Gabriel was saying.

But Zacharias had a good thing going for him. He was at the top of his profession. He was well-off, happily married and looking forward to a comfortable retirement. This Messiah business was just fine and dandy so long as it was only a beautiful dream. But the idea of it turning into reality was devastating. It would disrupt all his plans for the future.

The lesson to be drawn from this 2,000-year-old story of skepticism and disbelief is that just because Christ's second coming hasn't yet taken place, it would be the stupid to assume that it won't happen. Indeed, we'd be very wise to live our lives as though it were about to happen at any minute. The second lesson is that God answers our prayers in ways and at times we least expect. Sometimes he even gives us exactly what we want, at exactly the time we are praying for it. *AMEN*.