1st Sunday of Advent – Cycle C 11/29/15  
“Anticipated Joy”

Jeremiah 33:14-16  
Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14  
1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2  

This is the first Sunday of Advent when we begin the official preparations for Christmas. Yet instead of hearing about the preparation for the birth of Christ in the Incarnation, our readings sound like a repeat of the apocalyptic readings of the last couple of weeks when we focused on the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time. In fact, this gospel is Luke’s version of Mark’s gospel that we heard two weeks ago. Trials, tribulation, roaring of the seas, calamities, etc.; you don’t hear much about any of these things in Christmas Carols, do you? There are no carols entitled the “Twelve Plagues of Christmas” or “Violent Night”! So why are we hearing these again and why at the beginning of this new liturgical season of great anticipation leading us to the Joy of Christmas? The answer is because Advent is meant to be a time for us to prepare for the coming of Christ both in the incarnation at Christ’s birth AND at the end of time. The joy and anticipation of this season is much greater than the stuff of Christmas. Instead, it is a reminder of why God became incarnate in the first place: for our salvation which is the source of our joy. Yet this joy is also bound up in the anticipation of God’s plan reaching its expectant fulfillment and completeness at the end of time and our hope for being a part of it. Therefore, our preparation should reflect this hope that we have in God’s Mercy despite our sinfulness, not just for THIS season but throughout the year and throughout our lives for we never know when these events will occur.

Our readings, therefore, today are cautionary in the sense that although we can count on God to fulfill his promises, we must wait and hope that we have ourselves prepared to meet Him in the way that He intended. Jesus says, “Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life.” This sounds like something I think we can all relate to, especially at this time of year when we are
focused so much on doing and rushing and celebrating. Getting ready for things and gatherings, this is not the kind of preparation that Jesus is referring to. “Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent”, he says. In other words, our preparation is not about accomplishment but rather it is about an orientation toward God and an alignment of our hearts with the will and purpose of God. But this preparation is also meant to be on-going. We are being advised today that our preparation is not necessarily just for a particular moment in time but for the moment in time when we are called to give an account of our lives. This is one of the greatest sources of fear and anxiety: that we or our loved one was, or we will be caught off guard and ill prepared. We often experience this when someone dies suddenly or has a major life changing incident.

I realized this in a slightly different but very concrete way with the birth of our children. Our son, Tommy, was due at the end of October of 2000 and Tara and I had a plan for getting everything ready. Having never been through this before, we were scared, nervous, excited and focused on finishing the room for our new arrival. Shortly after we entered the month of October however, Tommy decided he was ready to make his appearance…17 days early. The room wasn’t ready, our hospital bag wasn’t packed, in fact, I literally was throwing random stuff into my car to go to the hospital and we didn’t know what to do. We were caught off guard but God blessed us with a healthy child in spite of it. Then eight years later, after we had come to peace with the fact that God was only going to grace us with one child, we were caught off guard again with the news of another child. This time we were going to learn from our mistakes. We made our plans and prepared in earnest, making sure we would be finished in case this one came early as well. And sure enough, Veronica decided she was ready to enter the world early, but this time it was almost six weeks early. We were terrified, not just because we weren’t ready but because we weren’t sure if she was! We prayed, we worried and we hoped that everything would be OK. God had mercy on us once again and now six years later we are experiencing the joy that our anticipation hoped for despite our inadequate attempts to be prepared.

And I think this is the point of these apocalyptic readings today. Do they scare us? Yes, maybe a little bit. But more importantly they are to teach us that Joy is not without anticipation and anticipation is a measure...
of our preparation. None of us is perfect and all of us should take this opportunity to look at our lives and assess whether we are properly prepared for life’s unexpected turns or end; whether we are vigilant to the traps and trappings of this world and whether we are able “to stand erect and raise [our] heads” in trust and true faith. This preparation however, should not be out of fear or merely a way avoiding hardship or trouble, but this preparation is meant to help us live in union with the Will of God, justly as his disciples.

This season of Advent is a penitential time. A time to take a step back and reflect on the things we need to change and fix in order to be properly prepared to “stand before the Son of Man” with confidence as his true disciples. Like my experience with the birth of our children, God’s Love and Mercy often affords us more chances and opportunities to try again in the hope of getting it right. However, also like this experience, time is rarely something we have any control over and therefore we must strive to make the most of the opportunities and time we do have knowing that despite our short comings and inadequate preparation we can always hope for God’s mercy. The birth of our children taught us this. This mercy however, is given to US ALL, also in the gift of an infant, who was sent to us as the ultimate source of Joy which we anticipate in this season. The question is, will we be prepared when He arrives?