

1st Sunday of Advent, C

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I want to talk with you today about the future. The First Sunday of Advent always focuses our attention on the future. The theme runs through today's gospel and the entire Season of Advent.

Many of you know that the word advent comes from the Latin meaning **"to come."** So, something or someone is coming to us in this season. We often think of what is coming as Christmas and the birth of Jesus. And it is but I also think it is bigger and more than that. In today's gospel, Jesus speaks of **"the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."** I think that's a metaphor for the future. I have recently begun to think of Advent as the coming of our future, and a time when we prepare, as best we can, if we can, for that future.

What comes up for you when you look toward or think about your future?

We all have a future, and we all deal with it in our lives. Some look toward the future with fear, anxiety, and worry. **"People will,"** Jesus says, **"die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world."** When have you felt like that?

Others look to the future with hope, eagerness, and optimism. They **"stand up and raise their heads"** with anticipation and expectancy. When have you jumped out of bed ready to get the new day started, and excited about the possibilities of what might be? Most of us, I suspect,

live with both of those outlooks. Which predominates for you today? What is the future you dread? What is the future you want and anticipate?

Regardless of which it is, **“the force of the future is to prevent the present from closing in on us, from closing us up.”** Advent **“pries open the present by promising us the possibility of something new, the chance of something different, something that will transform the present into something else.”**

I am not talking about the predictable future but the unpredictable future. We all have both. Most times we will ask, “What’s your plan for tomorrow? What have you got going on?” Or we will talk about what we want to do on the weekend, for summer vacation, or even retirement. We are talking about the predictable future, the future we are planning and have some control over, the future toward which we are working. With prior planning, common sense, some work, and a bit of luck we can have a reasonable expectation that the future will be as we plan. It is within our reach and control.

While we can plan and prepare for the predictable future, the unpredictable future comes **“like a thief in the night.”** It takes us by surprise. It is completely unknown and unimaginable. We cannot understand or make sense of it. We are not prepared for what is happening. How can you prepare for what you cannot see, know, or understand? It is those times in our life when we say things like, **“Not in**

my wildest dreams could I have imagined or guessed that,” “No, that’s not possible; it cannot be,” “God only knows.”

I am betting every one of you knows what I am talking about. I am betting every one of you has felt the unpredictable future pray open and forever change your life. Surely, that’s how Mary felt at Gabriel’s announcement that she would give birth to the Son of God. She felt the impossibility of a future she never imagined. **“How can this be?”** Have we not also asked that question?

The unpredictable future always holds the possibility of the impossible. The unexpected future is, however, always unfolding, always calling us forward, always asking us for a response. So, let’s not be too quick to name or judge it as good or bad, joyful or sorrowful, desired or unwanted. We just don’t know. We cannot name the impossible.

To name or judge the impossible would be to relativize it and close ourselves off from the advent of God. In Advent, the unpredictable future comes to us as a **“chance for something new, for a new birth, for the expectation, the hope, the hope against hope, in a transforming future.”** Advent does not promise an escape from the circumstances of our lives or the world. The promise of Advent, the possibility of the impossible, is revealed and fulfilled in those circumstances.

The predictable future falls within the scope of our power and possibilities. Things are manageable and, for the most part, we know what to do. With the unpredictable future, however, **“there are no guarantees, no contracts or warranties.... There is a lot of risk.”** That’s why Jesus says, **“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy Be vigilant at all times Pray.”** He reminds us that the impossible is the realm of faith, hope, and love. That’s how we are to live when **“heaven and earth are passing away,”** when there is **“distress among the nations,”** and **“when the powers of heaven will be shaken.”**

That means we do not give up when the sands of our lives are shifting under our feet. We do not give up **“when we come unhinged,”** when our ability is driven to its limit, **“when we are overwhelmed,”** or **“exposed to something we cannot manage or foresee.”** And we do not give up on ourselves or each other.

I am not talking about rosy optimism or determined perseverance. I am talking about staying open to the possibility of the impossible, to a future we could never imagine. I am talking about the call to faith, hope, love, courage, compassion, beauty, forgiveness, and healing. Are not those the things that speak to your heart and tug at your soul?

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I don’t know what the future holds for you and neither do you. But I know this. Those things I just listed – faith, hope, love, courage,

compassion, beauty, forgiveness, healing – are the voice of Advent. They speak of the possibility of a new life, a transformed life, and they call to us from the most improbable, unforeseen, and impossible places of our lives. They will pull you into and through the rest of this day. And when you wake up tomorrow morning, guess what? They will be there, waiting for you and calling your name. **Amen.**