

Advent 2, Year C

- Season of Advent tends to bring up number of debates in the wider Episcopal Church and beyond
- Debates like: should we wear purple or blue vestments during Advent? How long is Advent supposed to be? What's the 'correct' attitude of Anglicans toward the Blessed Virgin Mary?
- And perhaps my favorite debate: is Advent a penitential or an anticipatory season, or maybe some combination of both?
- There's an older tradition in the Church of using the four Sundays in Advent to address what are known in theology as the "four last things": those four are death, judgment, heaven and hell – as a preacher I just have to tell you, announcing that as an Advent sermon series tends to go extremely well
- But I do actually want to talk to you about judgment today, on this second Sunday of Advent – judgment and, perhaps even more exciting, sin
- That's a word we Episcopalians don't always throw around a whole lot – we don't even all have a great working definition of it: when I say 'sin' here, I'm meaning any action that is not of God, anything we do that serves to separate ourselves from God
- Sin is a concept that we're uncomfortable with, and I think I understand why, and I'd like to share it with you
- Has to do with the fact that virtue is always defined as a mean between two extremes
- Right, good way to act is always between two extremes – so, for example, courage is found somewhere between foolhardiness and cowardice
- Courage isn't fearlessness, but rather giving proper weight to fear – no more, no less
- Our attitude toward sin is the same way, and it's an extremely difficult balance to strike
- Most of us in the Episcopal Church don't talk too much about sin because we've heard too much from one or the other extreme – heard from people who either talk entirely too much about sin, like sin should overwhelm us completely, like it should be all we think about and we should often contemplate our total depravity – or from people who don't talk about it enough – who think that if we talk too much about sin, it undermines our essential goodness as creatures of God – after all, as God created the world, we know that God said at each step that it was good
- But if we want to have the right attitude toward sin, a virtuous attitude toward sin, then... means we can't take sin too lightly – but can't take it too heavily, either – have to give it its

proper weight

- Recognize seriousness/gravity of sin... then let it go
- In other words, yes, we should be upset when we sin – it should keep us up nights that, as people following a righteous God, still there is no one righteous, not even one, not even a single one of us, the people of God and the Body of Christ – we should take seriously Paul’s admonition that, as the Body of Christ, our sins are a very big deal because by them we bring sin into the Body – we should take seriously that our sins might be not only our own stumbling blocks, but stumbling blocks for others, that our sins might lead others astray – and Jesus himself said that it would be better for a millstone to be tied around our neck and thrown into the sea than for us to do that
- All of those things , the sheer gravity of sin and our own sinfulness should keep us up nights, on occasion!
- But then we should recognize that in Jesus, in the Incarnation and Crucifixion and Resurrection, God has forgiven all of it
- We should recognize the truth of **all** of those comfortable words from the earliest Anglican prayer books, and still found in our Rite I liturgies
- Come to me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.
- God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
- This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
- If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.
- We have to really grapple with the weight of our sins... and then we need to let them go
- If you look at a long enough timeline, too, that’s exactly what God tends to do – God doesn’t take sin lightly – gets upset, outraged, righteously indignant at sinfulness, especially the sin of God’s people
- But then, God provides ways for those sins to be forgiven, forgotten, held against us no more
- Like how I talked a few weeks ago in forum about rite of confession in Episcopal Church – officially called “reconciliation of a penitent” – and that’s an important part – it’s not just confession – if it were, then we’d still be carrying the weight of those sins with us – but it’s confession and absolution – after acknowledging our sin, we can let it go

- But can't skip to step two! – if we just try to let our sin go before even grappling with it, recognizing the seriousness of it – then we haven't struck that right balance we call virtue
- If we try to just say it doesn't matter at all, then we end up thinking sin isn't a big deal – and if it's no big deal, then why bother putting in the effort to stop doing it?
- Having a penitential season like Advent is about recognizing the severity, but only so that when we do let it go, we might actually be able to change, to reform our lives – and so that when we do let it go, we're actually truly free of it
- Like Zechariah, whose song we sing(/read) in place of a Psalm today, we can recognize that God has come to God's people – that God has set us free
- That we are free to worship God without fear, holy and righteous in God's sight all the days of our life.
- In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
- This is God's promise to us, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God"
- The salvation that washes us all clean, and in whom God will remember our sins no more.
- That is the message of John the Baptist, and of all the prophets, the message of Advent:
- God's judgment is coming, and on the merits we ought to be nervous – for we are all unrighteous sinners, we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God
- We all have done things that we ought not to have done, and we all have not done those things which we ought to have done
- And yet, God loved us – and yet, God still loves us
- And yet, God promises to sweep away our transgressions and remember our sin no more
- Isn't that God doesn't care about sin — and isn't that God gives up on us
- It's that the work that God is up to throughout all of human history including in our small corner of it is the work of reconciliation – of reconciling us to one another and to God
- Of recognizing the severity, the importance of all the things that we've done wrong, all the things that we can't help but do wrong
- And giving us chance after chance after chance to turn back to God and be forgiven
- That is the message we hear from the prophets today
- And why we pray to God, "Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer"