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PRESENT TENSE

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The San Francisco psychoanalyst Allen Wheelis once wrote allegory entitled “The Man Who Looked Into the Future” which tells the story of a geeky mathematician who discovers an algorithm that enables him to look with absolute clarity into the future.

It begins:

*Once upon a time there was a man who yearned toward the future. With clear vulnerable eyes he looked over present pain to misty goodness ahead. The present was a cruel and capricious wind, scraps of paper swirling around his legs ... [But] the future...was great discoveries to the benefit of mankind, and incidentally to his own security and fame. The present was contingency and death; the future was necessity and eternal life. The present was a desert across which, by ceaseless toil, he struggled toward the garden of the future.*

Now, the readings and hymns of the Advent season exhort us to look to the future and to expect a great and shattering last judgement of all things. We might find these notions too fantastic and incredible to imagine. It's the wacky right-wing millennial fundamentalists who are caught up with the notion of a fiery second coming in judgement. Middle-of-the-road and sensible Anglicans know that this apocalyptic language is metaphor and poetry.

Of course, on one level, it *is* only metaphor and poetry. The parts of the New Testament which speak of Christ's imminent return—including much of Jesus' own teaching—pose a problem for us. Because anyone with even a passing knowledge of Church history knows that only two or three decades after Jesus' death, the Church realized he wasn't coming imminently, that the scarlet clouds of judgement weren't massing, nor were the celestial trumpets sounding.

Yes, the prospect of judgement is a sobering prospect. But at least it would lift us out the present life. And save from this present moment.

Because we *do* despair of the present moment just like Wheelis's protagonist. Sure, Louis Armstrong sang, “It's a wonderful world.” But it's undeniably true that much of the time it really isn't so wonderful. In fact, it's a pretty lousy world, fouled by arrogance, greed, stupidity, corruption and evil.

Yet even though one of the messages of Advent Sunday is that God's future is about to break upon us with a glory that dispels the gloom of our present situation, there's another message, too. One which says we must learn to wait for the future with creative and joyful expectation.

The problem with this one is it sounds like one more bit of nice-sounding but ultimately hollow theological claptrap. Advent's culmination is hardly a surprise since we all know how this particular story ends. We know that on Christmas Day we'll once again have presents and carols and turkey—and all the rest. So this is one time where we *can* actually look into the future and reasonably predict what will happen. And so we simply fill the intervening days and weeks with busyness and revelry and spending.

But to leave the notion of Advent expectation at that is to live a shallow, aimless life. You see, if we expect good things to be right around the corner, we need to do something to help bring them to birth—right now. Similarly, if we worry that the future will be hostile, cold, and disappointing, we need to do something to help to change the course of history—right now. And if we want to discover the truth of the birth of Christ for ourselves, we need to go out into the world and look for the places where he is most likely to be found—right now. And if any of these things are to happen, we need to be God's active agents in the world—right now. Right here.

The man in Wheelis's allegory soon learned that looking into the future wasn't all it was cracked up to be. For

*the more he could see into the future the more he lived in the present. Formerly he had filled the present with drudgery, located all pleasure in the future. Now it was turning the other way around. All right, he thought, I'll try it, will go all the way. The first half of my life was given to the future, the rest I'll give to the present.*

You see, the present is itself a present. Advent calendars help us count down the days to Christmas, but they also give us a little gift each day. And I daresay those little gifts are as much the point as the big one at the end is. Sure, they may be only a glimpse, but they're enough to keep us going. For even though we can't know what the future holds, we *do* know that this day is a gift waiting to be opened and enjoyed.

You know, in Dante's *Inferno*, the damned can see the future but not the present. And the damned are all around us—and we're among them. Yes, we obviously need to plan for the future. To live as if today is all that matters is irresponsible. But too much of our time and energy can be spent living for—and looking to—the future that we neglect the present. We have to live in the day we're in.

Teilhard de Chardin said "The world will belong tomorrow to those who brought it the greatest hope." So it's entirely appropriate that hope characterizes Advent. For what can we bring to a despairing world if not hope? Hope not just for tomorrow, but hope for today. Hope that together we can unwrap the future's promise in the present

time—not just for ourselves, but for this weary world whose future has never given more cause for despair.

Especially because of that idea of a fiery last judgement I mentioned at the beginning. The thing is, God's judgement is his love—not his wrath. And if we can accept God's judgement upon us, can receive the redemptive love he offers us, and can believe that we are accepted by him *as we are*, then the present becomes endurable and the future believable.

Because I know that you're still looking to the future. To Christmas and beyond and are hoping that this year you may be given the gift that will change everything. You're not alone. We all feel that way. But here's the secret. The gift we seek doesn't come only at Christmas. We can have it now. Open it up. It's the gift of new life, of new possibilities, of the redemptive and loving joy which is found in Christ.

For once we've opened it and accepted it, we can, in turn, open ourselves up in love and service and be a gift to others. And when we dare to do this, we see that the future is already here.