

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, December 3, 2023, First Sunday of Advent.

Last year, at about this time, we prayed to God to “give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.” How did we do? Did we keep track of the “works of darkness” that we “cast away”? Did we “put on us the armor of light”? What was our total score? Something to be proud of, or something to regret?

Most of us, I suspect, would get a C. To those of you deserve As and Bs, more power to you. For the rest of us, a C is our nature, isn't it? A combination of growth and backsliding. Of pride and regret. It seems to be who we are.

There are two reasons why there is a Season of Advent every year. The first reason is to look back, and the second reason is to look ahead. Now, looking back is useful, if it helps us look ahead. If looking back gets in the way of looking ahead, we're missing an opportunity.

But if we don't look back at all, there is no growth. And that's not what we want. We don't want to be static. We want to move ahead. We want to do better. We want to realize the potential that God has given us.

But Isaiah said God is the potter and we are the clay. **(Isaiah 64:8)** That image suggests that we are mere objects, not subjects. Well, maybe the truth is somewhere in between. Not “one or other,” but “both and.”

It's as if God says to us, “Here is the clay. Have at it. I'm here to help, to advise, even to reconfigure if necessary. But I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do with the clay. I will provide a set of instructions, but you are not bound by those. But, you'll be a lot happier if you adopt them.”

I've often wondered whether the verbs “to adopt” and “to adapt” are related. I think they are. We are the objects of adoption, but the subjects of adaptation. We are loved, and we are expected pass on that love. “Thank you, God, for the wheel and the clay and the sculpting tools and the encouragement and the promise that you will always be available for counsel and advice. I'll try hard to make you proud.”

St. Paul in his Letter to the people of Corinth (**I Corinthians 1:3**) identifies the greatest of the sculpting tools that God provides. “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

What is grace anyway? It is a gift from God. It is a helping hand. We don’t earn grace. God provides it. Whether we recognize the gift is another matter. But, if we do recognize it, if we do accept it, our lives can be transformed. What’s gotten into her? What’s gotten into him? Something has changed.

Yes, what has changed is our acceptance of God’s gift. Life is calmer. Life is more confident. “Calm” and “confident” are important in sculpting. They are useful in every dimension of life. St. Paul is on target, isn’t he? “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

It’s the spiritual version of take a deep breath. Think about what you do when you start something. Free throws in basketball. Serves in tennis. The sports examples are endless. And taking a deep breath is not limited to sports. Surgeons take deep breaths. Getting married takes deep breaths. What do we do before an annual work evaluation with our supervisor? We take a deep breath. Mark’s version in today’s gospel is “Keep awake.” (**Mark 13:37**)

And I suspect that potters, those who work with clay, take a deep breath every time they sit at the wheel. And the product of their sculpting is better for them having taken a deep breath. There’s a calm that finds its way into whatever the task is at hand.

We know this first hand. It’s why we’re here. We have a sense of being adopted by the Lord. And we have a sense that this adoption is for a purpose. A purpose that we explore and then adapt to a particular situation. We try to make those situations better than they would be without the Love of God. We ourselves are instruments. We are sculpting tools. And, with all due respect to Isaiah, we are clay and potters, not just clay.

And we have instructions as to how to use these tools. We call these instructions “Commandments.” And we have Jesus to guide us, as we obey these Commandments. And not just Jesus, but one another. Never under-estimate your role in this whole enterprise. We can model taking deep breaths. We can

help others to take deep breaths. The Grace of God is out there for everybody. It's a gift to be opened, experienced, and shared.

Think of that. We, as carriers, as models, of God's Love. What a privilege. What a joy. And, yes, what a responsibility. God doesn't adopt us to hoard. God adopts us to adapt. Where is the need greatest? And, when we spot a need, what is the best way to address it?

Being adopted is a blessing. And adapting that blessing is a privilege. We're on God's team after all – and, with God's grace, a difference-maker. It's called fulfillment. Personal and corporate. It's what we are meant to do. Today's Psalm reminds us that "we shall be saved." **(Psalm 80:18)**

And there is a lot to do in this New Year. So, in thanksgiving for the Lord's sacrifice for us, let us take a deep Advent breath and continue to sacrifice for others. From the Lord's **adoption** of us to our grateful **adaptation** on behalf of others.

It's a pretty satisfying way of living, isn't it. And it's not accidental. It's intentional. It's why we're here. God at work in us and through us. Forget the grade of C. I think we're at a B, and climbing. Here's to the climb. Deep breath everybody.

Amen.

Lessons for Advent 1 – December 3, 2023

Collect: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which our Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remove iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Psalm 80:1-7, 1-18

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you, that are enthroned upon the cherubim.
In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help; us.

Restore us, O God of hosts;

show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

O Lord God of hosts,

how long will you be angered despite the prayers of your people?

You have fed them with the bread of tears;

you have given them bowls of tears to drink.

You have made us the derision of our neighbors,

and our enemies laugh us to scorn.

Restore us, O God of hosts;

show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Let our hand be upon the man of your right hand,

the son of man you have made so strong for yourself.

And so will we never turn away from;

give us life, that we may call upon our Name.

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;

show the light your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Second Reading: I Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Gospel: Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and

gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

The Gospel of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*