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by Mary M. McGlone

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"In the days to come." These words set the tone as they invite us into Advent, 28 days of seeking to better perceive where and how God is active in our midst.

Isaiah ushers us into Advent with his vision of the future God has in mind. We do well to remember the situation Isaiah was addressing when he outlined his vision. In the opening chapter of his work, the prophet described Israel's sorry state by comparing Israel unfavorably to an ox and ass who responded to their masters. According to Isaiah, Israel's culpable ignorance about God's presence has left her dumber than the ox and more stubborn than the donkey. As an alternative, Isaiah depicts a new possibility, a transformed future in which God's plan for peace and well-being is the divine design for all peoples.

## **First Day of Advent**

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Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:37-44

Matthew's presentation of God's future plan is summarized in the image of the coming of the Son of Man. "Coming" translates the spectacular Greek word, *parousia*, a word that combines the concepts of presence and essence. The Parousia brings us into the presence of the essence of Christ. It's easy to understand why many have understood the Parousia as a reference to the end of the world and Christ's coming in glory.

This year, we celebrate the longest possible Advent season, with four full weeks to seek and receive the grace this season offers. We need each of these days as Advent invites us to reconsider time and history. On one hand, we will recall the long story of God's interaction with humanity, how everything from creation, through the saga of Israel, led toward the birth of Christ as the centerpiece of history. On the other hand, Advent focuses on time's horizon when we will finally experience Christ

bringing all creation into union with himself so that God becomes all in all. Standing in the tension between these two intimately related moments invites us to identify with our ancestors in faith who slowly perceived how God was drawing them toward ever-greater life and ever-deeper relationship with God and all of creation.

Reading today's Gospel, we almost feel taunted or teased by Jesus' message. Three times he gears us up to hope for details about the future with the phrase, "So it will be." Then, each time he lets us down by illustrating the unpredictability of his Parousia. It's as if he is saying, "You can count on this for sure! You won't have any idea of when or how it will happen." The message? "Stay aware! Be ready for the unexpected!"

How do we do that? Obviously, much as we would like to, we can't draw a map to guide us into an unknowable future. How can we plan a journey to the unexpected? The first chapter of Isaiah offers us an essential hint. Isaiah described Israel as God's rebellious offspring, as people who had forsaken God. They had mistakenly presumed that mimicking the obsequious cults that pagans practiced would appease the God of Abraham and Moses. But, beyond empty ritualism, their real apostasy, their worst betrayal of the God who loved them, was their refusal to care about all God's beloved. No incense or sacrifice could make up for not heeding the cry of the orphan and widow. (In "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis adds Earth to this list, calling her, "burdened and laid waste ... among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.")

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In response to this situation of disorientation and rebellion, Isaiah offers the one solution possible. He invites Israel and us as well to join with "the nations," with all those who seek God, and to say, "Come, let us climb the Lord's mountain," so that God can instruct us in the divine ways and that "we may walk in his paths."

Isaiah describes this pilgrimage as a climb because Jerusalem was a city on a hill. Even more, this journey requires a strenuous movement beyond self, beyond the boundaries of family, clan and nation, beyond a fixation on humans as the center of creation. It is a journey toward the heart of God who is present in everything created and who beckons us toward a future that is more (broader, deeper, more varied) than we would ever imagine.

In the days to come, especially during these 28 days, we have a unique opportunity to wake up to Parousia, the myriad simple and spectacular ways in which God is present, drawing us forward together. Like Israel, we are called to form integrated communities rather than remain as individuals, denominations or nations. Unknowable as the future is, we can trust that, to the extent that we give ourselves to the quest, we will find what we seek — no matter how impossible to imagine.

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