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## *"~As If That Day Were Already Here*

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In the name of God, our Maker, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen

Many of us are having fun nowadays with stereotypes of race in a time of change. I'm reminded of the proverb, "The more things change the more they remain the same." Indeed, nowadays we may find some familiar stereotypes but also a new twist because of the change in presidential politics.

For example consider a recent Obama cartoon: Obama as a big mouthed, grinning Harlem Globetrotter in sleeveless T-shirt, shorts & sneakers with U.S. stars & stripes insignia on them and twirling a basketball on fingertips ""like ""he's got the whole world' at his fingertips. That's the 1st panel.

The 2nd panel shows bouncing toward Obama, indeed, a humongous globe of the whole world that's so large it's four times his own size. But now he's no longer smiling; instead he's already staggering as he braces himself trying to imagine how he's going to be able to ""play ball' with this monstrous sphere of the whole world coming at him.

[ [www.cnd.org/my/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php%3Ftopic\\_id=60631&forum=2](http://www.cnd.org/my/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php%3Ftopic_id=60631&forum=2) ]

For a 2nd example consider my favorite Obama joke. You can find the original version by comedian Bill Maher on the internet. But I prefer this paraphrase version going round the country: ""Yet again we've hired a black man to clean-up our mess.' In case you haven't been following the news for the last 8 years or the last 8 weeks, "mess" refers to 2 wars, increasing evidence for global warming and a global ecological crisis, and the economic meltdown from Wall St. to Main St. Or maybe you prefer this version: ""Once more we give the worst job in the nation to a black man.' (By the way, you're supposed to be laughing!)

And now, let's imagine how Barack himself might feel with this "mess" on his hands. Imagine Barack Obama at prayer, and imagine this paraphrase of the parable in today's gospel:

""O God, I knew you were a generous Master, empowering us to ""keep hope alive' and to ""keep the faith' and to ""keep our eyes on the prize,' and generally to ""keep on keeping on keeping on' . . . ; well, you know, all that.

""And O God, I do thank you for giving me so many talents to use in your service; you know, a biracial bio with a black African father and a white American mother, a Harvard law degree and a job in the U.S. Senate, a smart and beautiful African American wife and 2 lovely children . . . well, you know, all that.

""But, dear Lord, did you have to choose this moment in history to make me the first black president in U.S. history?'

Well, that's a 1st look at today's gospel after our historic election a couple of weeks ago. Now it's also your fortune today to

have a black preacher in this pulpit after the fact of that historic election a couple of weeks ago! So you'll have to hear how I'm hearing today's scriptures relate to that historic election a couple of weeks ago.

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Now you've already heard me say how that election relates to today's gospel—the President-elect at prayer, and he's paraphrasing the Parable of the Talents: "O God, I knew you were a generous Master . . ." "But, dear Lord, did you have to choose this moment in history to make me the first black president in U.S. history?" But I'm also hearing the recent election relate to our other scriptures today too.

Particularly that verse in 1st Thess.:

"But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief . . . [you are] children of light and children of the day. (1 Thess. 5.4-5)

Now, where have we heard this pre-Advent theme in recent days? First of all, notice with me that today's scriptures are already turning us toward Advent—the same way our falling leaves & fall weather are turning us toward the Winter solstice & the Feast of the Incarnation & the Nativity of our Lord called "Christmas." Yes, Advent is coming . . . Advent is about coming . . . And Advent is about the coming being here already.

Secondly, therefore, notice that Advent is about the light of the nativity star and the light of the Christ-child breaking into the darkness of our winter sky. Or in other words—the words of today's scripture, Advent is about not being "in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief . . . [you] children of light and children of the day" (1Thess. 5.4-5) By the way, earlier in church history Advent was longer; as long as the present changing of our seasons. Our scriptures still reflect that longer season of Advent; they're already turning, turning, turning like falling leaves and fall weather, turning us toward "that day."

But Advent is not only about the "day of the Lord" anticipated in today's scriptures; not only the "Day" that those 1st Thessalonians were longing for. For they were eagerly awaiting the Second Coming of Christ, the promise of reunion with their dead, and the prospect of paradise in the kingdom of heaven. But in 2008 these scriptures are also turning us toward our own versions of the "day of the Lord," our own "Advents" and "nativities" and our own new births.

And that brings me to the place where I've heard that verse in 1st Thessalonians speaking to our recent election two weeks ago. It's the place where I and my people have been waiting for our own version of the "day of the Lord;" our own brand of "Advent," our own form of "nativity" our own collective new birth. It's the place where some of us have had such an Advent befall us "like a thief in the night;" as if we were living "in darkness, for that day to surprise [us] like a thief . . ." (1Thess. 5.4-5)?

Indeed I just realized this after the fact—after the election in fact; after I read that editorial from our own black journalist, Cynthia Tucker in the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Listen to Tucker's admitting her surprise and that repeated refrain, "I didn't expect to find myself here so soon." It was published on Wednesday, November 5th, the morning after the election.

"Even now" [she admitted], "I'm struggling to find my footing on an altered terrain, a landscape where a black man can be elected president of the United States. It's an exciting place, a hopeful and progressive place, but it's unfamiliar. I didn't expect to find myself here so soon.

"Oh, I knew the nation would make the journey eventually, perhaps by 2020, I figured, when my 10-year-old niece and her cohort are frequent voters . . . But my generation has seemed stuck in a different time and place, a place where race still matters . . . So I'll be the first to admit I didn't believe it would happen. Not so soon.

"Born in Alabama shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down segregated schools, I've grown accustomed to a steady but plodding course toward racial equality . . . So as recently as September, I didn't believe my country would elect a black president. Not yet." [www.ajc.com/search/content/opinion/stories/2008/11/05/tucked.html](http://www.ajc.com/search/content/opinion/stories/2008/11/05/tucked.html)

Well there we have it. A confession of sorts. An acknowledgement of being taken by surprise, as by "a thief in the night," the way the scripture says it. And precisely there is our watchword for the coming season of Advent.

Maybe you've heard the pious expression, "Don't let anyone steal your joy!" and what they mean is "the joy of the Lord." Well, on a different level—the political and historical level—many of us have been living "in the dark" about the advent of a black president in U.S. history. I confess I too had despaired of the prospect. Yes, even some African Americans like me had let our hope be stolen from us, like "a thief in night." So we were vastly surprised, caught unprepared for the unexpected. We had become living parables of today's pre-Advent theme.

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How can it be different from this day forward? How can we learn this lesson and never again let ourselves despair so deeply? How can we no longer live daily "in the dark" about the prospect of things new and powerful and long hoped for happening more often in our larger world and yes, in our personal lives?

Consider in this connection those five proverbs you sometimes hear stated in completely secular terms but also with poetic power and charm:

Proverb 1: Live as if this is the last day of your life.

Proverb 2: Work as if you don't need the money.

Proverb 3: Love as if you've never been hurt.

Proverb 4: Dance as if no one's watching.

Proverb 5: Dream as if they all come true.

5 good rules of life, yes? And notice the common "as if" feature of that fivefold rule of life. Live as if; work as if; love as if; dance as if; dream as if . . . But also consider, in more spiritual and passionate terms, the "as if" of God extended to the Thessalonians in today's scripture audience. They were deeply devoted Christians who had lost loved ones: spouses and parents, children and friends; a host of "beloveds" with whom they had expected to experience resurrection and not just raw death.

Indeed, some of us are their counterparts in this congregation today. I have in mind particularly those of us who are divorcees, or widows and widowers, or in some other way estranged from a true mate or an intimate partner in our lives. Surprisingly, the grace of God has taught some of us how to live as if there were a fitting companion imminent in our lives; to live as if there were someone for us, if not now in the present, then someone coming toward us in the future. However this possibility of a new companion would not be so surprising if one has learned to count on the grace of God surprising us again and again with new life.

Or again, with regard to our departed loved ones some of us have learned to live as if they were still with us in some way—cheering us on into the future while knowing so well our past. That's the way the church teaches us to hold our dead in mind—not in some state of darkness or frozen in our memories, but in the "life eternal" and the "light perpetual" of God's own vitality. There, we affirm, they are alive and growing and active with us in that great fellowship called the "Communion of Saints." And our Lord himself affirms this in that stunning verse in the gospel of St. Luke: Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.' (Lk. 20.38)

So this is our Advent position and even our pre-Advent posture: to live already now as if the future of our resurrection life were already ours to benefit from and enjoy. This is our Advent spirituality and our Advent calling, and it is grounded in something we might call "as if" theology: "as if" God's future—the rewarding future that is calling to us—were already in fact here. Yes, Advent and pre-Advent are calling us—not to surprise us like a thief in the night, but to vindicate our present hope and to reward our enduring aspirations.

It may be too much to expect that we will never again be caught off-guard by some great good fortune or some unexpected outcome of world-wide significance. But let us try at least to avoid becoming cartoon caricature Christians. Consider for example the "believer" who began praying fervently for some person in their sick-bed to get well. But the next week she saw the person up and about and so chastised him, exclaiming, "What are you doing out! You're supposed to be home in bed and taking care of yourself. I've been praying for you! You're

not supposed to be walking around like you're well or something."

Well, there it is, isn't it! Caught in unbelief like someone surprised by a thief in the night. Acting as if we're not really expecting our prayers to heal anybody or change the world or anything like that! Let us pray that will not be our state of heart and mind when the next good thing happens""that next something-out-of-the-grace-of-God that snatches us up into the big picture of God's purposes in our lives and in the world.

[For] you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day. (1 Thess. 5.4-5)

And for that, "Let us bless the Lord!"

"Thanks be to God!"

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