

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

# TO CHANGE MY LIFE

A sermon preached the 27th of November 2016, the First Sunday of Advent, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Romans 13: 11–14; Matthew 24: 36–44; and the Collect for the Day.

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“If you have a sapling in your hand and are told, ‘Come quickly, the Messiah is here,’ first finish planting the tree and then go out to welcome the Messiah.”

— Rabbi Johanan ben Zakai, 30 – 90 AD

The Authorized (‘King James’) Version of the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer*; these are the two books most responsible for how we speak English. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer composed the collect for the First Sunday of Advent for the first prayer book in 1549, and it has been in continual use ever since. Its lyric power lay in this replacement dynamic: ‘cast away’ / ‘put on’. Whatever bad habit you’re trying to get rid of, don’t just get rid of it, replace it with a better habit to take its place.

Cranmer was inspired by our text from the Apostle Paul, “The night is far spent, and the day [of the Lord’s coming] is at hand: let us therefore cast away the works of darkness and let us put on the armour of light.” [Romans 13: 12]

Advent means ‘arrival’ or a ‘coming to’. It’s a penitential season less severe than Lent but penitential even so. In Advent, we Christians prepare for Christ’s comings to us, in humility at his birth and in his glory at the end of time. *The Lord is coming. Who of us will not want some time to make our heart ready?*

Victoria and I made ready for our whole family who were with us for Thanksgiving. Friday, we took the ferry to Fisherman’s Wharf. We walked the waterfront. Evan loves *Star Wars*, so Jack soon was wearing a hand-knitted R2-D2 beanie. As we went into a restaurant on Pier 39 called the *Swiss Louis* for lunch, I told myself to exercise some self-control; have a salad and a cup of chowder. Naturally, I ordered fish and chips. There was nothing wrong with the food, but two bites into it, having consumed too much the day before, I knew there was something wrong with me. As we left the restaurant to catch the ferry back, my children heard me repeating, “I need

to change my life.” I know just enough German that the last line of Rilke’s lyric poem *Archaic Torso of Apollo* was tugging at my elbow. “Du mußt dein Leben ändern.”

I need to change my life. I needed others to hear me say it. My gut wanted witnesses. And speech acts being what they are, it was an echo of the first time I spoke this way. So it is that a couple of days ago at 2 o’clock, I was no longer on Pier 39 the day after Thanksgiving. I was in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, forty years ago.

I am seventeen. My sister Vicki, my first mother in the Faith, is home from college. Entering the house through the back door, I overhear her talking to my father in the hall. She’s crying. I come up the stairs, and when she sees me, she darts into her room and closes the door. I ask my father, “Why is Vicki crying?” He won’t say. I go to my sister’s room, and knock on the door. “May I come in?” She doesn’t answer. I hear her sobbing in bed. I knock again. She won’t answer. I find my father who is standing now in the dining room. “Dad, why is Vicki crying?” He doesn’t want to say. My father has the patience of Job. I ask a third time. “You really want to know why your sister is crying?” “Yes.” “She’s crying because she just heard your little brother say that he doesn’t like you anymore.”

Sean is my little brother, six years younger than I. He always wanted to play ball with me and my friends growing up. How many times I told my cronies, pointing at Sean, “He plays, or I’m not playing!” I looked after him and he looked up to me. I hadn’t caused my parents any heartache to speak of growing up. But I am a senior in high school. The sun is shining on me. I’ve let a lot of things go to my head. And I am full of myself.

We believe in God, as most people do. But some of us most of the time and most of us some of the time do our best to keep God on the margins of our lives. Or we refashion God to a rabbit's foot suitable to our purposes, "making room in our lives for God" as we like to say these days. That is what I did much of my senior year of high school: made room (how very big of me) in my life for God. The prophets are unimpressed. They know God is too large to fit into our lives. If we want to be involved with God, we have to fit into God's life.

**P**enitence is surrendering to God, asking the Most High to change your life. Hearing my sister cry. Learning my brother didn't like me anymore. I saw the canary tip over in the cave. I knew that I had to change my life, and I needed to do it now.

That's the key word in today's collect. *Now*. "Almighty God, grant 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 your Son came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal."

"The end of all things is at hand," Peter says [1 Peter 4: 7]. What are we to do? How are we to get ready for the coming of the Lord? Peter says, "Be clear minded and self-controlled so you can pray. And above all, love each other deeply because love covers a multitude of sins. And offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." I just love the practicality of that.

Once upon a time, in Potomac, Maryland at this time of the year, I wanted to surprise the caboose of our family with some health food before picking him up from school. The nearest In-N-Out being 1300 miles away, I went to a KFC/Taco Bell and pulled into a drive-thru queue 7-cars long. I got to the talk box and ordered 12 chicken strips, 2 Doritos Locos Tacos, and 2 Crunch Wrap Supremes (Aaron liked them back then). The strips were for the family later that night. The Tacos and the Crunch Wraps were for Aaron and me the moment I

pick him up. I pulled up to the window and held out my credit card, and the Latino woman there waved it off. "I don't need it, Father" she said. "Your order was already paid for. The woman in the car in front of you paid your bill and she asked me to tell you, 'Merry Christmas'."

*That's hospitality!* I'll never know who did that. The woman drove off before I knew what she'd done. But this is the kind of thing you do to get ready to greet Jesus when he comes again. Don't go out in the middle of the desert and have prayer meeting to end all prayer meetings. Provide somebody dinner on the house.

**H**ow did John the Baptist want people to get ready for Jesus? Tax collectors came to him to be baptized. "Teacher," they said, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more money than you're required to." That's how you get ready for Jesus. Soldiers asked him, "What should we do?" He answered, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely. Be content with your pay." That's how you get ready for Jesus. "What then should we do?" the crowd asked. "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

I want to end with these lines from an old negro spiritual. *There's a king and captain high, and he's coming by and by, and he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes. You can hear his legions charging in the thunder of the sky, and he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes. When he comes, when he comes, all the dead shall rise and answer to his drums. Oh the fires of his encampment star the firmament on high, and the heavens shall roll asunder when he comes. There's a man they thrust aside, who was tortured till he died, and he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes. He was spat upon and mocked at, he was scourged and crucified, and he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes. When he comes! When he comes! He'll be crowned by saints and angels when he comes. They'll be shouting out Hosanna! to the man that men denied, and I'll kneel down in my cotton when he comes.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,  
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission  
please email us at [office@ststephenschurch.org](mailto:office@ststephenschurch.org), call us at 415-435-4501,  
or visit us at [www.ststephenschurch.org](http://www.ststephenschurch.org).*