Sunday December 2, 1973

"GOD's CONTINUING ADVENT" Jeremiah 31:31-34

There are many different kinds of years in our lives, ways of marking things off with endings and beginnings. A school year normally begins the last week in August or the first week in September. A company's fiscal year may begin on July 1, or on another date. And of course the main calender year for all of us in the western world begins on January 1. Dates of our birthdays and various anniversaries mark other kinds of years in our lives. To mark off events in years and months is one way we human beings have of keeping track of things and of reminding ourselves of what's happened.

So it is that the Christian Church has for centuries had a "church year," a calendar which notes the important happenings in God's dealing with us. This church year begins with today, the first Sunday in Advent, and runs through next November. It's a way of helping us to recall the major events which are a part of the Christian faith.

We all are familiar with some of the other main Christian Holidays and Seasons--Advent is followed by Christmas, then Epiphany, then the season of Lent, Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, and then finally back to Advent.

It's a kind of cycle which grew out of the experience of Christians through the years as they recalled and celebrated the major events in the life of Jesus.

Advent, which comprises the four Sundays and weeks before Christmas, signifies the period of time, the waiting of the world for the coming of the Messiah, for God's revealing himself to us in a new and fresh way.

This hope of the world Jeremiah expressed in our Scripture reading earlier--"Behold the days are coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . .I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Our opening Advent Hymn this morning, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," expressed this hope and desire also. Listen again to the words of the last verse, " O Come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind, bid envy

strife and quarrels cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace."

Incidentally, you may be interested to know that Christians did not always celebrate Advent and Christmas. For the first several hundred years after Jesus' death and resurrection, no one cared very much about the date of his birth.

In the earliest centuries there was one festival which commemorated both the birth and the baptism of Jesus -- Epiphany (January 6). It wasn't until 336 A.D. that the church in Rome began observing Christmas. Following that the festival spread slowly.

And even after Christmas was widely celebrated throughout the Christian world there were many Christians who were opposed to it. In England, the Puritans reacted violently against Christmas during Cromwell's rule. In fact from 1644 to 1660 the observance was illegal; church services were forbidden and the churches had to remain closed. Work was to continue as usual. Yuletide was known as fooltide.

Our own Pilgrim ancestors in America were opposed to the observing of Christmas. In Massachusetts in 1639, a law provided that "whoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of Labour, fasting, or in any other way, shall be fined five shillings."

The Puritans and Pilgrims were primarily opposed to the celebration of Christmas because they considered it to be too closely related to some ancient pagan customs and holidays. They were afraid that the true meaning of Christmas would be obscured. And this is always a danger. I'm sure that many who observe Advent and Christmas are not aware of what it all means.

What then are some of the things which Advent and Christmas tell us today?

1. Advent tells us that God is personal and is with us personally and in unique ways. Advent says this about God because it speaks of the coming of Jesus Christ. What is God like? Look at Jesus. Advent tells us that God still enters our world. It is not just something which happened thousands of years ago. It's a continuing event!

2. Secondly, the Advent preparation and the Christmas event which follows, both tell us that God often enters our world and our lives unobtrusively and when we may not be expecting it. God comes in common and ordinary ways.

What could be more common and unexpected than for God to enter his world in a baby born to a peasant woman in an out-of-the-way place, in a borrowed stable in a small town. There was no fanfare. The kings of the earth were not told of his birht. Only the shepherds and a few others knew of it, and they were not sure what was actually happening.

This morning we are going to celebrate Holy Communion. This action also speaks to us of God in the common and the ordinary. God is present among us in such simple and every-day things as the breaking of bread and sharing it with one another.

So it is that Advent reminds us that God still enters our world and our lives in this fashion. God enters our own private world and our public world when we may be least expecting it. God is still present in the most common events of life and not just in the spectacular. God is present when one human being reaches out to help another. Many times God slips into our world almost unnoticed and we may serve God without being aware of it.

Advent also tells us that God is often present in some of the movements of the world, the movements of history where we might least expect to find him at work. Do not just look for God in all the tinsel and glitter of Christmas preparations, but look for him also among the poor who have no decorations and among the sick and the longer living and those in prison. Look for God in the stables of the world as well as the fancy hotels.

Advent also reminds us that even though God is continually present in the world and in our lives here and now, yet God is still greater than all of this. God is more than this world. And while we continue to pray and work for the spread of his kingdom in this transitory world, we know that its center of gravity is not here at all.

So what we celebrate today is God's continuing Advent--his continuing coming among us. We celebrate an ever-present reality.