Last week we kicked off the season of Advent and by most measures it was a little intense. There were readings about darkened suns, the powers of heaven being shaken and the coming judgement. So comparatively speaking today is a lot perkier. We have a similar admonition – God is coming so be ready -- but it is told from a different perspective. And as a result it is a little less jarring than the impending doom vibe we had going last week. For me, the reason it feels a little different is because it starts to incorporate what, for lack of a better term, I will call the mindset of God and how the actual coming to earth is going to be done. If last week felt like we were on our own and our salvation would be weighed on giant scales of justice, today there seems to be more help. The perspective has shifted from God as a judge to God as a loving father. Today, we get the feeling that God is rooting for us and wants to help us get it right.

Here is why I say that. In the opening of our text from Isaiah we hear God saying, “Comfort, O comfort my people.” The Psalmist tells us that God has, “forgiven the iniquity of [his] people and blotted out all their sins.” And in Mark’s Gospel, John the Baptist while preaching the need for repentance also promises that when God comes, “he will baptize [us] with the Holy Spirit.” God sounds more giving and loving than judging and rebuking. Which may make us ask, when we think about the different visions we have been given over the two weeks: which one is right? That is when we think about the coming judgement and our salvation, which version is the correct one? Is it all on us like we seemed to hear last week or is God taking care of it like we seem to hear this week? Well since both these things are in the Bible and since they both come from God it seems like they must both be right. Which means I have some explaining to do. For the implication if they are both right is that Advent is a season about us working really hard to get right with God, while at the same time it is a season where we get to sit back and relax and let God take care of everything. So, how do we mesh these? If being up to us is option A and God taking care of everything is option B what I need to try and explain in the next few moments is what option C looks like. The option where we incorporate week one and week two of Advent to reconcile the two ideas and come to a fuller understanding of what God coming to earth is going to look like. To help in that task, let’s go to something that is always clear – the poetry of William Butler Yeats.

Yeats’ poem *Among School Children* is kind of a meditation on life, growing old, the afterlife and some other stuff. The poem ends with Yeats posing this rather famous question, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” It might sound like one of those “what is the sound of one hand clapping” type questions, but I think it brings up an interesting point about sometimes being unable to neatly separate things. I know very little about dancing and my feelings about it are one place where I am kind of a crypto Baptist, but what Yeats is demonstrating by his question is that the two things are linked. The dance requires a dancer, and that the dancer requires a dance otherwise neither exists. At least they do not exist in any recognizable sense. For those two things to exist they must be functioning in tandem.

Now to try and make my point and locate answer C. Think of what John the Baptist says today. He says that when Jesus comes, he will baptize us with the Holy Spirit. What this means is that we have God dwelling within us and we feel this indwelling in various ways. Maybe it comes from a sense of peace that we get when the world seems to be collapsing. Maybe we feel it when something tells us to do or not do a certain action or maybe something inside us is stirred when we look upon something of great beauty. Whatever it is, there is something in us which connects us with the God of the universe. And that something is the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, which alerts us to the things of God. Going back to the dancer and the dance explanation, when we are in touch with the Holy Spirit, we are like a member of the Paris Opera Ballet – the dancer and the dance are indistinguishable. Our will and God’s will are one. When it does not work so well it is like putting me in a 90’s boy band and having me attempt to do the moves – it would be awkward, disquieting and probably a little offensive. And so now hopefully to my point.

Just as we cannot separate dancer from dance, we also cannot sperate our salvation between ourselves and God. It cannot be all on us nor can it be all on God. In other words, it is not just the message of last week where we were reminded of our need to prepare, nor is it all this week where we are assured that God is there for us and wants to take care of us. Rather it is last week and this week working together. For you see we are not capable of being without sin and somehow earning our way into God’s presence. Also, God because he wants us to be able to love freely does not force us to be in communion with him. So, in order for everything to work it requires cooperation. We need to learn all that the Holy Spirit “will teach” as Jesus says in John’s Gospel and also rely on God’s love and mercy.

Earlier I said today gives us the feeling that God is rooting for us. I think that is a reasonably good way to put it – even if I am just kind of complimenting myself. God is not forcing us to be in communion with Him, but desperately wants us to live lives that are in harmony with his will. And because of that he is going to do everything he can to make that happen, including sending his son to make it all possible. And so, if last Sunday was about behaving, I want to say that this Sunday is about listening. Listening to that still small voice of God that we can hear because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the voice of a loving parent who is assuring us and showing us all that we can be. It tells us to cast off our fear and live in harmony with God. Not loving the things of this world more than Him.

For those of you who are parents much of this probably sounds familiar. There are things we want for our children, and we try to do whatever we can to get them those things, but we know that ultimately, we cannot force them to do or be what we want. Now this is of course not a perfect example because parents may not always do the right thing. Some parents are pretty looney. But broadly speaking parents want what is best for their children and try their hardest to make those things happen for them. A parent might help a child study, they might make a phone call to help them get a job or they may just do more basic items, like taking care of a dinner or picking them up from hockey practice. All of these actions help free the child so that they can be who they are called to be. God today tells us that He is ready to handle a lot of items for us but that we need to participate. Our will and God’s will need to meet and our will needs to be subsumed into His perfect will so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.