

St. Alban's Chapel Talk: Advent, December 2021

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Good morning 7th and 8th graders!

This is the time of year when Christian churches on the planet celebrate a season known as “advent.” From the Latin, “advenire” it means arrival, and in particular, the arrival of Jesus Christ to Earth. The reading this morning is an often quoted prophesy of the coming of Christ by Isaiah – a prediction which was made over 700 years before it happened. By the way, advent not only refers to Christ’s birth arrival celebrated at Christmas, but the Church looks toward his second coming, his return to Earth, his arrival at the end of time.

The Advent season is seen as a time of great preparation and anticipation, not just for the traditions surrounding Christmas, but of preparation for the future, preparation for Christ’s arrival in the future when he returns to Earth. For this reason, it is actually more traditional to be more conservative during this season – to fast, to pray and to patiently wait.

Advent means arrival, and even if you're not of the Christian faith, it is easy to get caught up in the gift giving frenzy and preparations which are common to all cultures as we arrive at the end of the year.

This morning I'd like to tell you a story about a most spectacular advent season, a spectacular arrival during my late mother's senior year at McKinley High School.

We're talking about 80 years ago when my mother was a high school senior, and until my mother's final days, she could still remember that senior year vividly. For example, she recalled the image of her classmate, the future Senator Dan Inouye, walking down the hallways, always surrounded by a huge bunch of guys. Dan was always the center of attention at McKinley. The fall of her senior year was filled with much activity like senior years are today. McKinley was the largest public school in the state and my mother's senior class alone had 1077 students in it.

December rolled around in her senior year with Christmas activity and bustling sales. Fort Street downtown was festooned with garlands of

Christmas lights across the street at 20 foot intervals. A new large open market was opening downtown with fish, livestock and poultry stalls. Ads in the Star-Bulletin and Advertiser announced seasonal sales at a large department store called Liberty House, now known as Macy's.

So as McKinley High School students went home that first Friday in December, it was the end of a typical school week and the start of a typical weekend in what was then, the U.S. Territory of Hawaii.

Yes, it was finally December, and the halfway point of my mother's senior year was almost there.

That was a Friday, December 5, 1941 and little did she or any of her fellow senior classmates realize after school on that Friday 80 years ago, they would be facing a weekend that would change their lives and the lives of everyone on this planet, forever.

Two days later at 7:55 AM on Sunday, December 7, 1941, hundreds of Japanese warplanes, launched from Japanese aircraft carriers far out at sea, attacked the American Pacific fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor. The attack took a terrible toll: eight battleships, including the *USS Arizona*, three light cruisers, three destroyers and four other naval vessels were either sunk or damaged. 164 American aircraft were also destroyed. Most hadn't even gotten off the ground. And 2,403 Americans -- servicemen and civilians, were dead; 1180 were injured.

Not only were bombs dropped by the Japanese planes, Americans shot many anti-aircraft bombs into the air in order to hit those Japanese warplanes. Unfortunately, many of these bombs did not explode in the air and instead those bombs rained on civilian homes and buildings in Honolulu. My mother's classmate lost a brother when a bomb hit this classmate's home and toppled an icebox and crushed him to death instantly. Another child in the family lost an arm to the explosion. Such incidents were common on that day.

Lunalilo School very close by here in McCully suffered heavy fire damage as an anti-aircraft shell exploded on its buildings.

The constant explosions and the whistle of bombs dropping could be heard all over Honolulu, including at `Iolani School, whose campus back then was in Nuuanu. It was horrific, utter chaos on Oahu and your grandparents or great-grandparents can tell you about it vividly, if they lived through it. Nothing like this had ever happened to the United States of America before. While we think of advent as a time of preparation and anticipation, this was an advent or arrival that no one could have prepared for.

Military governance immediately took over as martial law was imposed in Hawaii. It was an unbelievably frightening time as no one had any idea whether another invasion by the Japanese would be imminent.

A blackout – absolutely no lights throughout the islands was strictly enforced. And because of it, all stores were ordered to be closed by 4:30 pm daily.

Schools were closed. So, so much for a senior year at McKinley or anywhere else for that matter.

Only later were schools to reopen, but many students like my mom would volunteer for Civil Defense or other jobs and would not return for the end of their senior year.

At Iolani School William Tai, a sophomore from Kauai at the time, remembers that his mother called him back home to Kauai because she felt Honolulu was much too dangerous a place to be. Many Iolani students, especially the boarding students we had back then, returned to their home islands.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor Iolani School, like all schools, closed temporarily. Iolani reopened in February with most of the Upper School faculty gone. There were only grades one through eight, although 34 remaining seniors were tutored and allowed to receive diplomas in June.

There were no graduating classes for the remainder of the war. In fact, we now call Iolani alumni who were not able to graduate from 1943 to 1945 the “lost” classes at Iolani School. My own father was in one of those lost Iolani classes.

Hundreds of my mother’s classmates volunteered for the 442nd Infantry Battalion and many never made it back from Europe alive.

While natural disasters are terrible and horrific occurrences, thankfully they do come to an end and things gradually get rebuilt. However, during a war, everything is so terrifying and uncertain. What will be our next directive from the military? And the looming question was never “Would we be invaded again?” but “**when** would we be invaded again?”

I think that because of living through the pandemic you can now better understand the uncertainty of life in Hawaii during the war. For example the looming questions for us now are not “Would we be invaded by a new Covid strain” but “**when** would we be invaded by a new strain again?”

In 2011 I accompanied my mother to her 70th McKinley High School class reunion. From a class of 1077, only 70 were able to attend this gathering. They were in their mid-80's with rapidly dimming memories, but they were uniformly thankful for surviving the war years, for raising families, for contributing to the building of Hawaii economically and politically, and for skirting illnesses and death which had overtaken so many of their members. They were above all thankful for having a life beyond that fateful December 7th day, 80 years ago when their senior year came to an abrupt end. Hopefully, 80 years from now YOU will be able to tell your grandchildren or great-grandchildren about how `Iolani survived the CoVid invasion of the 2020s.

Today, advent season often degenerates into a season of excess. While gift-giving is reduced to an indication of how many friends you have or how many friends you want, let's remember what the arrival of that advent 80 years ago brought to Hawaii and with it, let's remember others who this season are facing similar tragedy and basic needs, not the least of

which is caused by this pandemic. Even though we don't hear about it in the news often, there are still many students like you who are not as fortunate as we have been at `Iolani during this CoVid pandemic. These students outside of our school face many challenges ahead with educational uncertainty, loss of home, loss of parents' jobs and loss of parents themselves. There are many students concentrated on the West side of our own island who are without permanent homes or shelter. There are many more children around the world who are caught in the midst of war and conflict, just as we were in Hawaii in 1941.

Even though we've just come out of a season of thanksgiving remembering the blessings we have, at this time of year it is very easy to focus on what we don't have, what we want, and what we think we're entitled to at `Iolani. This season let's let the tragic advent events of Pearl Harbor 80 years ago remind us that we need to focus on the needs of others and the true meaning behind advent – the arrival of Jesus as the hope of salvation beyond death, and the hope of a safe life here on Earth. Shall we bow our heads in prayer.