

## Honoring Advent

I was glad when my dear friend Steven asked me several weeks ago to consider preaching for you all on the subject of Advent. The spiritual journey of Advent, like that of Lent, to which it is related, is a journey on a path that I only began to walk in young adulthood. It is not, like so many Christian practices, one that I have known since my infancy. In fact, during my boyhood and teen years, the idea of celebrating Advent or Lent would have been looked on by my Southern Baptist peers and mentors with some amount of suspicion, if not outright hostility. Those practices would have been too Papist for my conservative-to-fundamentalist Protestant coreligionists. But during my college and seminary years, my perspective was broadened and I began to appreciate the many disparate paths not only of the Christianity I claimed as my own but also of the vast panoply of the world's religions. Because this congregation celebrates the positive, life-giving aspects of many beliefs, I am especially honored to spend time with you in order to unfold the meaning I have discovered in this ancient Christian tradition.

One of the reasons I have come to particularly cherish Advent is the way in which it stands as a counter-cultural buffer to what our dominant Euro-American culture has made of the run-up to a very holy day in the calendar of the Christian Church – Christmas. For centuries, the Church marked the four weeks prior to the great feast of the incarnation of God in Christ as a time of spiritual preparation and contemplation. Advent was like a gentler version of Lent, a time to repent, perhaps to fast, certainly a time to fall into rhythm with the season as the days grew shorter and the nights grew longer, as the weather turned cold and rations were kept short to last out the winter. It was certainly not a time for the frantic month-long round of parties and events and gift-buying that we now experience in the United States between Thanksgiving and New Year's. The Feast of Christ's Mass might extend the twelve days between Christmas Day and Epiphany, if one could afford it, but Advent was a time of quiet preparing, not of manic activity. Many churches, particularly those of the liturgical traditions, try to maintain this difference still, to offer our congregants an escape, a refuge, from the almost enforced jollity that the dominant, profit-driven culture seeks to impose on everyone with a credit card.

But if Advent is not parties and spiked punch and omnipresent high calorie treats and Black Friday sales, what is it? It is, as I mentioned, a time of spiritual preparation as the Church prepares once again to greet the advent, the coming, of the Messiah. It is, in this way, an expression of one of the deep paradoxes of Christianity; in this case, that central Christian paradox of already and not yet. We proclaim that Christ has already come and comes again and again to us, yet we hold this as a time of anticipation and waiting for his coming. Over the years, we have developed certain traditions for this time of waiting in the scripture passages we use for the focus of our worship during Advent, in the themes of that worship, and even in the rites of the worship itself. This morning, I want to touch on the broad categories of those scripture passages as well as those themes and on the beautiful symbolism of the Advent Wreath. I hope by the end of our time together that you'll feel more connected to this ancient Christian custom and that, like me, you'll find in it some of the tidings of comfort and joy we wish in this season.

Let's start, as you do at every service with your bookcase, by opening the book of scriptures used in my tradition. We begin with passages like the one I read earlier from the Book of Isaiah, passages in the books that we Christians revere in the tradition of the Jews and which we call the Old Testament. After the twin cataclysms of the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians and the exile of most of the population of the Kingdom of Judah by Babylon, the

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remnant of the Children of Israel began to yearn for a Messiah, a man anointed by God to lead them back to their homes, to rule over them with justice and in peace and prosperity. Although the exiles were allowed to return, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the temple of their God, they never found that peace and prosperity under a renewed House of David. Wars continued, invasions continued, people looked in vain for justice and for wholeness. But around the year 30 of the Common Era, an itinerant teacher gathered a group of disciples, was crucified by agents of the Empire and reportedly resurrected by the power of God. His disciples believed that he was the promised Messiah and began to associate those earlier words from the prophets with him. To this day, part of the teaching in the Church during Advent is a review of those prophecies and how they connect to the story of Jesus. So we hear the story of Isaiah's challenge to King Ahaz, "...the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel..." We hear Isaiah's promise of the peaceful kingdom: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." We hear the words of Isaiah that Jesus is said to have applied to himself in a sermon in Nazareth: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..." We hear prophecies from Nathan, from Jeremiah, from Baruch, from Zephaniah and Micah and Malachi and more. And in some weeks, we hear the words of the prophet that preceded Jesus and that tradition tells us was his cousin: John the Baptizer.

We remember these words during Advent, I think, not only to continue to link our belief in the story of Jesus to the even older tradition of the God of Abraham as expressed through the Children of Israel but also to set before us the vision of the world as God intended it to be. And that leaves us with another of those great paradoxes of Christian thought – if the Messiah has come, why is the world not healed? Why don't we live in the world as God intended it to be? Why are there still wars and plagues and floods and earthquakes? A second set of readings gives us a possible answer. Among the sayings attributed to Jesus himself are a number of visions that fall into the category known as apocalyptic. They foretell a future of terrible calamity which will herald the return of the Messiah and the ultimate defeat of evil. For example: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." That's from the Gospel According to Luke and the other gospels record similar sayings. Jesus' impulsive friend, Peter, also gets in on the action in Advent in one of the books that bears his name: "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed."

But there are also hints in our traditional Advent readings that preparing ourselves for Jesus to come swooping down from the sky to fix everything probably isn't the answer that we need or

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even that Jesus intended. We also find in the writings of Paul and James and others that are preserved in our New Testament the idea that while we are waiting for the Messiah to come back, maybe we could be about the business of getting the place ready for him. Paul, for example, reminds the Christians in Corinth that they “are not lacking in any spiritual gift as (they) wait for the revealing of... Jesus.” He encourages the Thessalonians to rejoice and pray and to live in such a way as they “may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” To the Romans, Paul writes, “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus...” And Jesus himself, in the Gospel According to Matthew, when teaching his disciples about waiting for the end times, counselled them to stay awake. The key to “being awake” comes only after he has told them three other parables convincing them that they must be ready. Jesus tells them that it is the little everyday conduct of their lives that will mark them as those watching for the Son of Man: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

These lessons for Advent from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures then are not only about the anticipation of the Messiah’s reign on earth but also the Messiah’s reign in our hearts. Even if we are waiting for the Messiah to come and change the world, the fact that we are waiting tells us that the new world, the world God intended this one to be all along, has already begun. In our anticipation, we have made that world our true home and we are called to act as if we were citizens of the world as God designed it and not as humankind, evil, or entropy have rendered it.

We further symbolize this lesson in the traditions of the Church with our Advent wreath and with the themes we associate with the candles. Each Sunday in Advent, we light another candle on the wreath, lighting the middle white candle, representing Christ, on Christmas Eve. Each candle has a special meaning. We start with a purple candle, the candle of hope. Then, in turn, we light another purple candle, peace, then the pink candle of joy, and finally the purple candle of love. We usually talk about our purple candles and décor as referring to the royal birth we are preparing to celebrate, the birth of the little King in Bethlehem. Purple has always been a color associated with royalty, given the rarity of purple dye in the ancient world and its resultant expense. But purple is also a somber color, which we recall with our use of purple candles in Lent. For centuries, Advent was a kind of shorter Lent, a time of contemplative preparation for the coming of Christ rather than a drawn-out birthday party. Christians fasted and prayed during Advent, just as they did during Lent. And, just as the fourth Sunday of Lent was celebrated as Laetare Sunday, or “Be Joyful” Sunday, with the fast broken and celebratory pink vestments worn by the priests, so the third Sunday of Advent was dedicated to joy with a break from fast and pink rather than purple décor.

The colors of the candles, of course, while interesting, are hardly the point. A meaningful celebration of Advent, one which is counter-cultural, as I mentioned before, focuses on those universal themes cherished by all people of good will as well as on the story of Jesus and his life and possible return. It is in the contemplation of hope and peace and joy and love that all of us here today can find our common ground and our shared desire to make this world a better place. If we can step out of the whirlwind of things during this five weeks in the dark of the year, if we can break through the siren song of spending and getting to instead focus on the flickering light

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of those four virtues, then Advent can be real for us whether we claim Jesus of Nazareth as our Lord, as a prophet, as a great teacher, or just as a neat guy. My friends, we must hope, never giving in to despair, so that we can see the beauty in those around us and in our world and so that we can have the energy to defend what is right. We must seek peace and its greatest constituent, justice, for we know that where there is no justice, there is no peace. We must open our hearts to joy – not happiness, which is fleeting, but the true joy of faith that together we can make a difference, that we can bring a world of beauty just a little bit closer to fruition. And we must love, because we are loved. If you doubt it, look around you at this brave company of friends that gathers with you every other week.

What's Advent? It's a time of reflection and preparation, preparation to live yet another trip around the sun in being the light that the world needs. What's Advent? It is hope and peace and joy and love. What's Advent? It's my gift to you today, a gift that I can give because it was given to me again and again and again. For all the gifts of the Creator to us, thanks be to God. Amen.