

Sermon-Advent I 2011 (Year B)

Richness of the Season

The juxtaposition of Thanksgiving Thursday and Sunday's first Sunday of Advent always startles me. Not that that is a problem, but it creates of cornucopia of riches just by its chronology. Neither has anything to do with each other, and yet, year after year, we celebrate Thanksgiving with gusto and may or may not notice that Advent is upon us.

Most people seem to say "O Christmas is almost here...how did that happen so fast again?" Or, "Oh my Lord, how am I going to get ready for Christmas?" I rarely, if ever, hear anyone worrying about how he or she is going to live into ADVENT.

That is why we will have two weeks in Adult Forum this year to focus on Advent themes—to offer an additional avenue for you to grasp the depth of Advent opportunities. I assure you that only the Christian church will pay any attention at all to Advent. After all, it was invented by the early Church to help people focus upon the coming of the Christ, from a spiritual perspective.

You might ask, is there any other perspective concerning the coming of Christ than a spiritual one? Not really; however, the feast of the coming of Christ has taken a few turns and twists over the years, to the point that all my adult life I have had to contend with either the "rushing of the season" or a marginalization of the feast as a spiritual celebration.

You know exactly what I mean: even Advent Calendars have been hijacked. The idea of a "secular" advent calendar is an oxymoron, yet it is part of the confusion about the season. Children get chocolate candies or some such treat each day leading up to the big day: the day you get an even bigger piece of chocolate or special treat.

That may be fun, but it has absolutely nothing to do with preparing for the coming of the Christ Child. Let's use religiously themed advent calendars for our children...and lessen the confusion for them and for us.

Maybe Advent is just too scary

Looking at Advent through the lens of the celebration of a baby's birth is easy. We all like babies, and we are corporately captivated by the manger scene of old. In the Christmas pageant there is something sweet and innocent and hopeful in its presentation—even for the biggest scrooge and curmudgeon!

But what about looking through the lens of apocalyptic language, such as we hear in today's *Gospel of Mark*? Maybe it is too scary to take in. Maybe it challenges us too much to spend time thinking about the end of time, thinking about the sun being darkened, and the moon not giving its light...and stars falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens being shaken. (I'll bet some shoppers felt like this was happening on Black Friday when things went badly.)

This apocalyptic language is roaring with meaning and challenge for us, however. It causes our heads to turn sideways, jerking us to places we might not like to go. When that happens, it means we need to pay attention. We need to think about the “dark” side of Advent, the apocalyptic side. It is part of the story.

It's really not so dark, if we look at the outcome—the Coming of the Cosmic Christ—as Yale historian Yaroslavl Pelican depicts it—but the destruction of sun and moon, heavens and earth, everything that we know, is simply difficult to fathom, isn't it? It reminds us that things as we know it will come to an end, and we are instructed to be mindful of this...and be ready to open our minds and hearts to the possibilities of the “glorious impossible.”

That term the “glorious impossible” belongs to Madeline L'Engle, when she writes of the coming of the baby Jesus. I borrow it today to use in a parallel manner to help us grapple with the coming of the Cosmic Christ at the end of what we know as history. A “Glorious Impossible,” indeed.

So there we are....

So here we are. It's 2011. It's Advent again, and we must make some decisions as Christians. We pray in our Collect for the Lord to give us grace to “cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light.” That makes sense. I believe we do want to live in the light and be a light unto the world. I believe we want that for our children. I believe we want to help ourselves and others humble our own hearts and reject the hardnesses we collect through the bumps and hic-ups of daily life. I believe we would like to have time to reflect more upon the ultimate questions surrounding the idea of Christ's coming as the Sun of Righteousness. I

believe we do not have to know the answers, but that we need to ask the questions and engage with one another about what the coming of Christ really means.

We must be prepared to know that it means many different things to many different people—Christian and not—and that we all have a great deal to learn from one another.

Thanksgiving

On Tuesday last, I attended my first ever “Grandparents Day” as an actual grandparent of my grandson, John, a kindergartener at The Norwood School in Bethesda, Maryland. Besides the obvious pride I experienced with my own little guy, observing him in Spanish and Reading classes, I sat in Chapel in which every age group through middle school, offered musical offerings—song, string orchestra, brass and percussion orchestra and a hand bell choir. That was wonderful enough, but the words of the headmaster hit home, and I bring it home to you: that our world is tough and demanding. To live well in our world, and I am paraphrasing, we must employ the virtues of “grit and gratitude.” “Grit and gratitude”

Sitting next to an old friend whose lovely husband had also died, we immediately poked each other when he uttered that phrase: “grit and gratitude.” Yes, I thought, that is it! It is not enough to have gratitude for our incalculable blessings, we must also approach daily life with just plain grit in order to live successfully. (I would add, “Gracefully.”) Student or adult, the truth is the truth: “grit and gratitude,” yes...and this applies to our appropriation of the coming of Christ as well. As Christians, we express gratitude in many ways, and do not fear the exigencies of life which require employing “grit” sometimes on a daily basis! The Jesus of the Gospels certainly offers us numerous examples of both for our comfort and guidance.

May we have gratitude in our hearts for God’s presence and guidance, then, now and to come, and let the preparatory nature of the Season of Advent light our way to the “glorious impossible” of the coming of the Christ.

Amen

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