

Advent 1 B 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

November 29, 2020

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The conception and birth of Jesus signifies that God becomes human. The Spirit and the flesh come together. The divine and the human become one. The sacred and the secular, the holy and the common, grace and nature— become one. It's a scandal. The hard part for the Church and the Church's preachers at Christmas is to remind the world of how scandalous and outrageous the whole thing is.

When, after three centuries, the Church assigned the birthday of Jesus to December 25, the Church knew that it was competing with the pagan party time of the year. The solstice. The Saturnalia. From the inception of Christmas, it has always been a tension between the pagan traditions of the season and the pure Gospel message of the Church. That's been there all along. Evergreens— wreaths, mistletoe, holly, Christmas trees, garlands— the decorating of our indoor spaces with evergreens is a completely pagan custom that existed before the Church created Christmas. So that's always been there. That tension. But I've come to believe it's appropriate. Because there is a tension in the incarnation itself. The birth itself is scandalous. The shepherds and the Magi are the wrong kind of people, paying homage to a Savior who is born in the wrong kind of place, in the most filthy and awkward of circumstances.

So the Nativity itself is the crossroads between the sacred and the secular, between God and humanity. It's not surprising that the Church and popular culture don't get along. For the Church, it's twelve days that begin on December 25. For popular culture, it begins at Thanksgiving, or earlier, and ends on December 25. But that tension, it seems to me, was baked into the cake when the Church of the fourth century created Christmas. It was baked into the cake, as a matter of fact, when the Son of God was born to unmarried parents and laid in a manger.

The shoulder seasons of Christmas, which are Advent and Epiphany, are not celebrated by popular culture, and so they don't generate the same conflicts as the ones that are baked into the cake of Christmas. Advent is the pre-Christmas season which begins today. By definition, it is the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. It always lasts at least 21 days, but never more than 28 days.

The theme of Advent can be found in its name. Which is Latin for *coming*. It is not specifically about the coming of Christmas. It is about the coming of God. Yes— a God who comes into the

world in Jesus. But not just at Christmas. A God who comes in hidden ways, in surprising ways. One of the great Lutheran hymns that is sometimes sung here has this question for its title: *O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?* God is coming. How shall I meet him? Where will that meeting take place? What should I wear? What will my demeanor be, my attitude, my disposition?

And that's the overall theme of Advent. It's not preparation for Christmas, in terms of wrapping presents and baking fruit cakes. It's about the coming of God into our lives, in ways that might be predictable and in ways that might be mysterious. Our hymn of the day, which we will sing momentarily, says: "*Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand.*" So that's one perspective. God is coming. Be silent. Stand. With fear and trembling, stand. Some awe is required. Some modesty is required.

Vigilance is also required. Jesus says today, "Keep awake!" We hear that a lot during Advent. Wake, awake, for night is flying. One contemporary word that we might substitute for keeping awake is mindfulness. Being mindful. God shows up in strange ways. He wears many masks, Martin Luther said. Ask Abraham and Sarah. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." [Hebrews 13:2] Mindfulness. The prince sometimes comes to us as a frog. *Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. But Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.* [Luke 1:28] In other words, Mary thought to herself, "This is kind of weird." But she kept an open mind and an open heart. Mindfulness. *Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.* [Matthew 1:19-20] Joseph also had to check his assumptions. Mindfulness, spiritual wakefulness, is a theme of Advent.

God is coming! But, Lord how shall I meet you? Stand and be silent. With fear and trembling. With awe. With humility. With vigilance and mindfulness.

The sheer genius of Advent is that it draws on the riches of the Old Testament to help us prepare for God's coming. Of the four Sundays of Advent, two are devoted to John the Baptist. John, eating locusts and wild honey, is the personification of the prophets. He is the epitome of the Old Testament prophets. Advent is the harvest of the Old Testament by the New Testament and by the Church. John the Baptist is the personification of that. But the great medieval O Antiphons, which we know today as *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, are a harvesting of the Old Testament for clues to the Son of God. Of what to look for in the Son of God. Seven names: Wisdom, Mighty God, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Morning Star, King of the Nations, Emmanuel. Seven names. Seven ways to be mindful and alert. In the seven verses of that hymn and many other ways, Advent harvests the Old Testament for our benefit in this moment.

Advent ends on the night of December 24. And the season changes, and the mood changes, as the Church officially enters its season of Christmas. But the lingering effect of Advent, for those who observe it year after year, is hope. We spend those days, those 21 to 28 days, devoting ourselves to the coming of God. The coming of God says something about his absence. If he's

coming, he's not here now. Christian hope is what we turn to when God is absent. (Or feels absent.) Hope is what we turn to when things are not as they ought to be. Advent cultivates hope. It harvests the Old Testament. And it cultivates hope. And if there is one thing our world needs more than anything else, it is hope. I encourage you to embrace Advent, and its themes. Keep awake, be mindful, be open to mystery. Keep silence. Its these Advent kinds of things that cultivate hope. Amen.