

Advent 3 C 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 12, 2021

Luke 3:7-18; Philippians 4:4-7

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

Dear Friends:

If you pay a lot of attention on Sunday mornings, then you know that our Bible readings are assigned on a three-year cycle. The scriptures repeat every three years. But that's a change in the last half century. An ecumenical change— in other words, a change in several major Christian denominations, starting with the Second Vatican Council in the Roman Catholic Church. But for about a thousand years prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic church had used a one-year cycle of readings, a one-year lectionary. And when the Lutherans and the Church of England came along, five hundred years ago, they continued using that one-year lectionary and stuck to that same understanding of the church year.

And so for what was essentially a millenium, Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglicans used the same set of scripture readings every year, year after year. And so when the change began fifty-odd years ago (1969), it was easy to change the scriptures which were read out loud, and it was easy to change the preaching to match the new scripture selections. But lots of other things could not be rapidly changed. So, for example, this is the 1958 worship book, and it used the one-year cycle of readings. This is the 1978 worship book, and it uses the three-year cycle of readings, but it only had a one-year cycle of the prayers of the day. You know: the prayer of the day, that opening prayer that the pastor gives near the beginning, which kind of keynotes the worship service. The 1978 worship book had a three-year cycle of readings, but only a one-year cycle of prayers of the day. And then in 2006, at last, thirty or thirty-five years later, the prayers caught up to the lectionary changes.

So a similar thing happened with advent candles which haven't been around for a thousand years, but they've been around long enough that they have resisted the reform of the liturgy and the reform of the lectionary. When you typically see them, you see four candles— three purple and one pink. An up-to-date version would be four blue candles. At Dove of Peace in our sanctuary, we split the difference. Three blue and one pink. If you go on Amazon, and look up Advent Candles, there will dozens, maybe hundreds of choices. They all have pink candles. And maybe one in every 25 sets will be blue instead of purple. But the vast, vast majority are three purple and one pink. While I was online, I looked up the pope. His Advent candles are all red. All four of them red.

Advent candles have resisted change, I think, because the holidays make us nostalgic, especially for childhood. And children love candles. The history of the Advent wreath and its candles has

more to do with children than with worship. And so people approach the holiday season with a lot of memories and a lot of nostalgia, and they do not necessarily bring a lot of logical thinking and biblical theology with them. The purple candles are a legacy of the medieval tendency to turn Advent into Lent. Purple is the color for the season of Lent. The theme of Lent is repentance. Lent is preparation for Easter. So if Advent is preparation for Christmas, then it took on the characteristics of Lent. And purple is the color of Lent. And in the medieval church, Advent involved fasting. Just like Lent. Music was restricted, weddings were banned, parties were not allowed. A spirit of repentance. John the Baptizer appears in today's gospel urging the people to "*Bear fruits worthy of repentance.*"

Into the medieval season of Advent, on one Sunday, the choir injected a message of rejoicing. The choir keyed each Sunday of Advent by singing an introduction at the beginning of worship. And if you have a copy of the service folder, you can see on the cover the traditional introit for the third Sunday of Advent. In Latin. Because it was all Latin, all the time. *Gaudete in Domino semper*. From Paul's letter to the Philippians. "Rejoice in the Lord always." And so the third Sunday of Advent was keyed by a message of rejoicing. Rather than repentance. And so instead of purple, the church decorations were pink. That's where the pink candle, standing amid the purple candles, comes in. This, also, was a miniature season of Lent. In medieval Christianity, the fourth Sunday of Advent was called Laetare Sunday, *Laetare Jerusalem*. Rejoice, Jerusalem. Latin has two verbs for rejoicing, and two Sundays got nicknamed for those two verbs. Gaudete in Advent, and Laetare in Lent. Laetare is nicknamed "Rose Sunday" because the church is decked out in pink. Lent does not have candles like Advent. But Lent had four purple Sundays, and one pink Sunday. And Advent, copying Lent, had three purple Sundays, and one pink Sunday.

And so when Amazon offers dozens, hundreds of Advent candle sets— Three purple and one pink— do you think that the people who are buying those candles understand that they are embracing medieval Latin Christianity, and that they are embracing a winter season of Lent with fasting and self-denial and sobriety? I kind of doubt it.

But today our second reading is in fact *Gaudete in Domino semper*. Rejoice in the Lord always. Paul's exhortation to the Philippian Christians. So: rejoice. Light a pink candle. It doesn't happen every year, and it isn't the choir singing an introit. It's scripture being read aloud in the pulpit. But it does happen every third year, once every 156 Sundays, and today is that Sunday. Simultaneously, on this same Sunday, John the Baptizer urges the crowds to *Bear fruits worthy of repentance*. So: repent. Light a purple candle.

The season of Advent was created by human beings, not by God. The celebration of Christmas on December 25 is a human tradition, not a command of God almighty. Whatever John the Baptist was trying to accomplish on the banks of the Jordan thirty years after the birth of Jesus, I can assure you that John the Baptist did not have the season of Advent on his mind, nor did he care about candles, nor did he care about all the various colors that candles come in. If he wore camel skins and ate locusts and wild honey, I doubt that purple and pink were his preferred

colors. In the season of Advent, if we observe it at all, we are preparing for the coming of God into our lives. If the queen of England were coming to dinner at my house, I imagine I would do some things to prepare for her arrival. In a spiritual sense, I am seeking to spiritually prepare for the coming of God into my life; indeed, into my world. And God is considerably more than her majesty the queen.

The Church helps me to prepare of the coming of God with several verbs. One of those verbs is stay awake. Watch. Be vigilant. God comes in surprising ways. Ask the shepherds who were in the hills tending to their sheep. Be awake, be mindful, be attentive. That's an Advent verb.

Make room. That's another verb. Prepare the way of the Lord. If your life is full and loud and busy, there is no room for God. This is especially true of our civilization at this time of year. We are too busy with our parties and activities. There is no room in the inn. Advent says make room.

Repent is another verb. Today John says that you should not presume that you are entitled to God and his goodness in your life. *Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.* Get off your high horse, and get down on the ground. *Bear fruits worthy of repentance.* To John, that means helping those who need help. Being fair, being just, and acting within your own station in life. John is also talking to Jews and Gentiles. Religious insiders and religious outsiders. Some people around us are very generous at this time of year. Very mindful that life can be short and cruel. And they try to make it a better place at this time of year. And those people— be they Christians or pagans or atheists— are more aligned with John here than are some of us Christians who are busy celebrating our selves and ignoring the needs of those around us.

Keep watch, make room, repent. And rejoice. Joy comes from standing on the promises. Joy is not blown around by the ups and downs of our world and our lives. Rejoice in the Lord *always*, Paul says. Not just in the good times. Joy is a tree in the desert that has roots down in the aquifer. Rain comes, drought comes, but the tree is rooted in the water of life. That's joy.

So these are spiritual verbs that make sense of Advent, now in December, or in any other season when we are seeking God's presence in our lives. Keep watch, make room, repent, rejoice. Purple candles, blue candles, pink candles. Orange candles, burgundy candles, gold candles, peppermint stripe candles. One thing all Advent candles have in common is that we light more and more of them each time. God is near. And God will be nearer still. That's a promise, a promise worthy of rejoicing. Amen.