

## Advent 1 B (2011)

*Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.* ~Gandhi

Some of you remember my friend, Tom Nordberg, who gave a rousing sermon for my installation a couple of years ago. Tom helped me move my library back to Wisconsin from Indiana, which is just one among many second mile gifts that long ago qualified him for the life-time achievement award that we bestowed on one another: Best Friend in the Universe. Tom and his beloved wife Sue had a golden retriever named Gunther, a much beloved member of the Nordberg family until his death a year or so ago. Tom taught Gunther to hold very still while Tom put a dog bone treat on the top of his dog's nose. Tom would say, "Wait for it. Wait for it." And Gunther would obediently look beyond the treat (somehow not cross eyed) to his master and wait. When Tom said, "OK," Gunther would toss the bone up and snatch it out of the air in a split second. It was a great trick.

Advent is the church's attempt to train us to wait like that. God puts Christmas on the top of our nose and says, "Wait for it." Then on Christmas Eve we sing, *Silent Night*, *O Little Town of Bethlehem* and *Joy to the World* and get that treat. The trick of waiting makes the treat even better.

I don't want to sound like a snob or elitist or anything, but the church in training "gets it" in ways that the rest of the world just doesn't. The rest of the world saturates the air waves with premature Christmas and doesn't even know what Advent is. Secular culture does not have a clue about the meaning of Christmas or the value of waiting. Commercial culture lives by the credo, "Why wait? You can have it all now. No payments for another six months!" We have the church all decorated for these four Sundays of Advent for a very specific purpose: to help remind us to "Wait for it."

Our culture is all about immediate gratification. Go for it. Have it all, and have it now. Why wait? Our faith is counter-cultural in its peculiar observance of Advent. Our blue candles, wreath and altar cloth are small but important symbols of the church, swimming against the stream of

cultural current, a cluttered room already draped weeks ago in red and green and gold.

All our rehearsing for the Christmas pageant and choir concerts is just that --rehearsing, practicing, getting ready. But it's not the same thing as announcing the birth of Jesus. Advent is active waiting. Our cryptic Advent lessons invite us to wake up, stay alert and actively watch and wait for the coming of God into our lives. Advent reminds us that though there is an "already here" aspect to our faith, there is also a "not yet here" aspect as well.

The "already here" aspect follows the well-worn script: shopping like mad on Black Friday in a stampede for bargains on holiday gifts that have been on display since Halloween; having Santa parades and concerts of holiday music on or before Dec. 1<sup>st</sup>; squeezing in all parties before Christmas even begins on the 25; not waiting to sing the carols of Christmas; and then of course being done with it all well before the end of the real twelve days of Christmas.

But the Advent "not yet here" aspect has no such script. Advent is a "little Lent" in the church when we read the story of John the Baptist preaching repentance in the wilderness, calling us to strip down and examine our hearts and seek to make way for the coming of the Lord by removing some of the distractions and clutter in our lives. We light our four small candles: one for hope today, one for peace next, then one for love and one for joy. We gently count down to the day that nearly coincides with the longest and darkest night of the year, with the least sunlight (in the Northern hemisphere), and on that day celebrate the coming of the "light that shines in the darkness."

It makes no sense at all and quite distorts the point of the celebration to have all the merrymaking end before Christmas day. That's just handing the dog a bone. Ordinary. No trick at all. What makes Christmas special is the extraordinary journey of Advent, the "wait for it" active waiting that makes the arrival a much bigger deal.

Advent mixes the first and second comings of Christ in ways that the rest of the world just cannot fathom. It takes training and preparation to fully enter into the miracle of the Incarnation, God with us (Immanuel). It takes immersion into the long biblical tradition of a chosen people who wander for years in the wilderness after years of slavery and exile and deferred promises. Sociologists call what we preach in Advent "deferred

gratification.” I call it “Wait for it” theology. Advent reminds us that though long ago Christ was born, lived, suffered, died and was raised for the sake of the reconciliation of the world, nevertheless, there is a “not yet” associated with this “already.” We still need to hear the angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth.” But not just yet. Wait for it...

In Advent we are reminded that the dark and foreboding end of the world scenarios may just be a bright new beginning. You have heard me say before that the end times are not the main point of the church’s proclamation, and they are especially not the point when wrapped in violence, destruction and bloodshed that always accompanies apocalyptic preaching. A thousand years ago, during a European plague-driven period of doomsday expectation, Francis of Assisi was digging in his garden when a fellow monk asked him what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow. Francis said, “I would continue to hoe my garden today.” Five hundred years later, another monk was asked what he would do today if he knew that tomorrow the world would end. That monk, whose name was Martin Luther, said he would plant a tree. In colonial New England a meeting of legislators was interrupted by a sudden eclipse of the sun, causing those gathered to panic and beg for adjournment. But one legislator said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought.”

Yes. Bring out the candles. Light one for hope. Then next week light one for peace. And so on. Keep Advent. It’s not Christmas just yet. Wait for it.

The difference between the overblown and premature Christmas of the shopping malls and the one we get ready for in Advent is illustrated by a comment by Mahatma Gandhi, who said,

*Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.*

The prayers of Advent are a longing of the soul and a daily admission of weakness. They are prayers of an empty heart without words, a longing heart full of only yearning and hope. So much of what we hear in the frantic weeks between Thanksgiving Day and Christmas is more like what Gandhi called “words without a heart.” When we “wait for it” during Advent training, on the other hand, we are emptying the broken heart of the world so that the Word might enter in.

This will be the third Advent that you have heard me say that Advent delivers something like the old McDonald's slogan, "you deserve a break today." The rush of the Christmas of culture imposes a great weight of obligation and responsibility on households, that somehow preparation for Christmas means doing lots of ready-making things and being especially busy and stressed and doing our level best to make sure that our holidays will be packed and full to overflowing with joy. You deserve a break from that. Can't find a date to squeeze in one more party before Dec. 25<sup>th</sup>? I say, who says you have to? That's supposed to be the beginning of Christmas, not the end. Why not have a party or pageant or concert sometime around Epiphany, the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, the end of the twelve days of Christmas? Why have we all sold out to the idea that Christmas must be front loaded? You deserve a break today. Take a break from the stress and guilt that come from nearly everyone's inability to "make the perfect Christmas." (That may be why my family laughs so hard during our annual viewing of the film *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, a satire about this obsession to have a perfect Christmas.)

Preparation for the celebration that commemorates the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, on the other hand, does not need to be measured by how fast the electric meter spins when we have finally strung together all our twinkling lights. Making ready to celebrate the birthday of Jesus is not a countdown with a ticking clock and time running out. Empty "hearts without words" are more receptive to the "holy child of Bethlehem be[ing] born in us today" than are "words without heart."

Picture in your mind a most festive room decorated to the hilt with a tall and perfect tree and bright lights and shining ornaments and draped garland and steaming food and sparkling gifts and bustling people running back and forth from the kitchen with trays full of fresh-baked cookies and bowls full of foaming punch. Now picture in your mind a plain room with a simple table on which is a single candle beside an open book. I suppose most people are attracted to the first Victorian image rather than the second rustic one. But it is the second image which best corresponds to the world into which Christ is born. "No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in." Bethlehem was not Jerusalem. The stable out back was not the inn.

Advent isn't just some throwback religious lid to slam down on the world's fun. It is a time set aside, if we will take it, to "wait for it" by making the kinds of spiritual preparations that are more about emptying than filling,

more about silence than noise, more about peace than frantic activity. Advent reminds us that making ready for Jesus takes place in an empty room, an empty heart.

*It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without heart.*

We step into Advent today with a longing of the soul. May its days to come inspire that admission of weakness which makes room for the Word made flesh, the “dear Christ” to enter in. Wait for it.