

Sermon for Advent 1: November 30, 2008 What are you waiting for????

Every year when Advent rolls around I get a little confused. I know it's not confusing for most people: this is the pre-Christmas season. You don't have to look far to see the evidence of this: every year the shopping malls, flyers, (now did you know you can helpfully get all your flyers online), and commercials, seem to start selling Christmas a little earlier, and let's be honest, it's all about selling Christmas.

Here's where the confusion sets in. It's our holiday. It's the celebration of Christ's birth, and the season before it, Advent, is here to help us, well, not to decorate or bake or buy, but to prepare our hearts. Not to get the house ready or the party lists drawn up, but to prepare room in our lives for God. God forbid there should be any God-talk anywhere but inside our churches, but sometimes I wonder, would anyone notice if the churches stopped celebrating Christmas? Or would anyone notice if we actually stuck to our guns (oops) our values, and insisted that this is Advent, not Christmas, and that the 12 days of Christmas don't actually start getting counted until the 25th, and after?

I'm not sure. Would anyone notice if we just stopped?

The fact is, Christmas is no longer our holiday. It belongs to the empires of the world who make toys, who market them to children at a rate of some 3000 messages a day, and then create all sorts of outrageous expectations in the hearts of children, most of whom have dreams that are only going to get shattered on Christmas morning, or if not, impoverish the parents trying not to shatter those dreams.

If you think about it, Christmas never WAS ours. It was first the celebration of the birth of the sun-god Saturn, a pagan celebration. It got taken over by the early church who wanted to make all the holidays into holy-days with a Christian significance. But isn't it ironic that Constantine, the emperor (leader of an empire) was the one who blessed the state religion of Christianity. I mean, here's the empire declaring that the most un-empire kind of holy-day, should be the state's holiday!!! Now, as then, the whole enterprise has been taken over more by the boys who care about the balance sheets than the faithful in the pews.

If nothing else, the story of Jesus is one of empire destruction, empire de-construction. A contemporary equivalent for us would be the young man who stood in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Remember that? He stood up to empire; he challenged the powers of the day. He said NO to oppression and fascism and empire. This is exactly what Jesus did.

He stood up to the Romans, to the Herods of the day, to the religious authorities who had been co-opted by the Romans so as to keep peace in the land. That was an expensive peace.

What Advent reminds us is this: Jesus should not be remembered primarily as a little helpless baby in a manger on a cold dark night in a stable. Don't get me wrong, I love that image and I'm happy we still tell that story. But it's only part of the story, and to be honest, it's not the real story. Jesus wasn't killed because he upset the status quo of how children are born; he was killed because he directly challenged the state, both the state political system and the state religious system. He was dangerous.

And if you think about it, by letting both systems have their way with him, and by dying an ignominious death in such a crude and horrible fashion, Jesus pointed out the whole sad powerful-powerless system

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that killed him. They weren't about making things better; they were in it for their own salvation (i.e. saving their own skins).

So Jesus is not a sweet character, and in particular, we see this side of him in Advent. Actually, that should be something we should celebrate. I'm so thankful that he wasn't some mild-mannered sweet little has-been prophet in the middle of nowhere. He had guts. He had wisdom. And he showed that more could be accomplished in this world through actions of love and justice than the powers that be could ever manage with their guns, their violence, and their state-approved oppression.

Which brings me to the situation today.

It's not all that different. We still have systems of power and domination that rule our lives. In fact, we are even more aware of them now, given all the news and information available to us. Nowadays, we actually watch as situations unfold, many of us glued to our TV sets (CNN probably) as breaking news get played out over and over again. I feel the same way watching those terrorist images from the hotels in Mumbai, as I did on September 11. Stop showing those images over and over! It just encourages more people to commit violent acts, AND it damages all of our psyches. It numbs us to accept that THIS is reality, that THIS is the way the world works (IS IT??), that the current reality is the ONLY reality and, as faithful people, we just have to make the best of it, and do our best to change it one small bit at a time. That too is acquiescence. Just go to your churches, good little church people, and the system can carry on while you pretend to make a difference with your prayers and your rituals.

This is completely counter to the message and the person of Jesus Christ. He was not about milk-toast solutions to social inequities. He was challenging the whole darn system, by insisting that every human being needs to take into account their part in it, and, by changing their part in it, change the entire system of pain, violence and domination.

THAT'S why we still pray: Come Lord Jesus Come. (Advent means "Coming")

Not because our world needs to be saved by some outside alien, arriving on a spaceship from heaven, in order to right all that is wrong with the world.

No, on this first Advent Sunday, we ask that Jesus be resurrected, that his life and mission come to life again in our hearts and minds, that the church takes up again the challenge to challenge the world as it is, with a new and different vision and version of "how things are."

Essentially, we are asking to be emboldened by the strength and power of the Christ within us. And it starts with this very basic belief: **that there is a Christ child within us.**

Did you forget that?

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Have you succumbed already to the siren song of the shopping malls, those temples of satisfaction and glorious sanctuaries of Christmas music?

Did you forget that the message of Christmas has no power whatsoever if we are not ready or able to let it into our minds and bodies. It's not really about ASSENTING to the whole story, or simply giving it a yearly nod. (as in: "well, that's Christmas for this year").

Nope. It's about Belief.

It's about Believing that the kingdom of God IS present on earth, in our midst, in our bodies, in our churches, in our world, just as Jesus said it would be.

It's about believing this when all the evidence clearly points in the opposite direction. It's not a great world out there, and we're basically on a path of self-destruction if we continue the pathway of war, retribution, violence and revenge. That path, we already know, as history has pointed out again and again, is a path that goes nowhere.

Nothing good comes of it. Only more death, more violence, more pain.

You are all going to think that I am a modern day Scrooge. Nope. I love Christmas, and I love the family aspect of the holiday. I just don't think that as a Christian minister, I can advocate continuing to celebrate this season the way we celebrate it, as a celebration of Jesus. Jesus really doesn't fit in with the way we do Christmas, which may be why most people are happy to leave him out.

No, I am not Scrooge. But I am dissatisfied. I think that we have taught people, in fact, we've taught our own children, to think too small, and when it comes to the gifts of Advent which we celebrate so blandly often as hope, peace, joy, and love, I just think that our version of hope is far too small, especially for the world in which we live, but also, because it just isn't the kind of hope Jesus taught.

If I could have Jesus come again, I would ask him to focus more on hope, the hope that makes tomorrow possible. But since I'm not necessarily sure he in fact will come again, I'll take the next best thing. And for me it symbolizes like this;

Remember the young man who stood up in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square almost 20 years ago. I see hope in that. But what would really turn me on, and make me really believe in hope, would be if all of us joined him in front of that tank, standing up to violence, and saying no to the powers of domination, oppression, and seeking a different way of being in the world.

That's why I love Jesus: he offers us this: a different way of being in the world! That's what I am waiting for, preparing for, searching for, and living for.