**1 Advent**

**November 29, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. This begins a new liturgical year for us. We begin our journey toward Christmas … the Feast of the Incarnation. We have the Advent wreath with one candle lit and one more will be lighted each Sunday until Christmas. We even have a special calendar for this season. That is how we see this season through the eyes of the Church.

However, a retail economist sees this season through different eyes. Today is November 29th. That means that, including today, there are 27 shopping days until Christmas. The sales numbers for Black Friday were lower than in past years, but many online retailers began their sales before Thanksgiving … and the total sales numbers seem to be up, so retailers are expecting a good year. That is how much of the world sees this time before Christmas.

So, just how are we, as people of faith, supposed to see this season? How are we to both be cognizant of the claims of the Church, and at the same time live in the reality of a commercial world? How do we resolve this tension? On the one hand we could live in the world and take a one hour break by coming to church on Sunday morning. Or, on the other hand, we could imitate a monastic lifestyle and ignore everything around us that is screaming that it is time to buy, and party, and to trade gifts.

Is there a middle ground? I believe there is. Although the world moves to the beat of its own values, we, as people of faith, have access to the deep and ancient sacred rhythm handed to us by our spiritual ancestors.

I think that we who live on the coast have a deeper appreciation for the natural rhythm of things like moon phases and tides … perhaps more so in Lincolnville where some of the streets flood during a full moon high tide. And I believe that we of the 21st century can only imagine what it must have been like for early humanity as they came to mark the passage of days, weeks, and years. Today we are surrounded by digital clocks set to the beat of vibrations of certain atoms. However, early humanity had only the sun and moon and stars to define time. Sunrise and sunset defined a day, and length of shadows marked the hours. The stages of the moon set the length of weeks and months, and as these early peoples became more sophisticated, the summer and winter solstice … when the length of day was at its longest and at its shortest … and the spring and fall equinox … when the length of day and night were equal … became the sacred markings of seasons told to them by the sun and the stars.

It may be surprising to some that Christmas … that is, the birth of Jesus … was not celebrated at all until several hundred years after he lived. The primary holy day for Christians was the Day of the Resurrection … Easter. I’ll say more about that in a moment. It wasn’t until the mid-fourth century that Christians began observing Jesus’ birth … but for some it was in August, for others it was in May, and for some it was in March. Then, in the sixth century, the date was set … at least for Christians in the West … at December 25. The theory is that it was set on the same day as a pagan holiday of *Sol Invictus* … the *Unconquered Sun*. This holiday was a celebration of the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere … a day that marked the longest night of the year and the beginning of the return of the light of the sun. It made sense for Christians … Jesus was the light of the world so he came to birth at the same time as the sun’s new life.

In many cases the Christian Church has adopted dates for its holy days that may have been indigenous celebrations long before they became Christian holy days, but even those were set by the seasons … by the sun and the moon and the stars. Our Easter is clearly dependent upon the Jewish Passover Festival, which itself was set to coincide with an indigenous observance of the Spring Equinox. The rhythm of sun and moon are deep in our spiritual bones, and although the world walks to a different beat these days, we are reminded to pay attention to this sacred rhythm that has a claim on us and on the Church.

It is not my intention to chastise people for sincere gift exchanges, or to berate the institution of capitalism, but rather to point us in the other direction, towards the holy and sacred in the midst of the profane. This is Advent, and the fact is that we are, as people of faith, preparing for the Incarnation. As the world calls us to profane consumption, our faith calls us to prepare for the divine power of God to come alive in this world … it calls us into a different rhythm.

I imagine that at least a few of you know the poem by Wendell Berry, *Peace of the Wild Things*. Let me read it to you.

When despair for the world grows in me

and I wake in the night at the least sound

in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,

I go and lie down where the wood drake

rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things

who do not tax their lives with forethought

of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars

waiting with their light. For a time

I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

I have copy of the poem on my computer desktop. It is a poem that makes sense to me when I wake in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep because of whatever fear or anxiety lives in me at the moment. And it is a poem that makes sense to me when I watch the wood ducks and great herons on Lake Maria Sanchez, and I sit quietly looking at the glistening stars reflecting off the calm waters.

Anyhow, as I was preparing to write this sermon, thinking about Advent as a time of preparation for the Feast of the Incarnation … Christmas … I saw a Facebook post that was a photo of this poem in a book. I’ve seen the post before, so I clicked the “like” button and went on to the next Facebook post … without reading the poem. Then it occurred to me … “liking” the poem is not the same as reading the poem. “Liking” the poem acknowledges its presence. Reading the poem internalize its meaning.

That’s when I realized that that is what I and many others do with Christmas. Instead of living into the reality of something sacred being born into this world, we just acknowledge that this is a holiday. The purpose of Advent it to prepare us to see Christmas as something more than a holiday to be acknowledged … rather a sacred moment in time when something holy comes to life in us.

It is a primary element of my faith and theology that God is alive in each of us, just as God was alive in Jesus. Therefore, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God’s Son, we are celebrating the manifestation of the sacred in human form. In the narratives of Matthew and Luke we hear stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, and in the Fourth Gospel we hear John’s theology of Jesus as the logos of God … the Word of God. Yet embedded in everything Jesus does and says is the proclamation that we are made in the image of God. The Incarnation is not just about Jesus, it is also about all humanity, and about each one of us. At Christmas we are celebrating the birth of Jesus, but we are also celebrating that divine and sacred power of God coming alive … over and over again … in each one of us.

So, what must we do to prepare for this Incarnation … for the explicit manifestation of the indwelling of God’s spirit within us? How might we live during this Advent so that it is more than just a season in the Church year? How might we be the sacred vessels of God’s divine power within us while living in the midst of the worldly concerns of today’s times? How might we access this deep and sacred rhythm handed down to us by our spiritual ancestors?

It seems to me that our scripture readings this morning point to some possible answers, but maybe not what appears most obvious. The prophet Jeremiah declares:

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.*

In Paul’s letter to the Christian community at Thessalonica we hear:

*And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

And in Luke’s Gospel reports that Jesus says:

*Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.*

Jeremiah is longing for God to rule the world with justice and righteousness and peace; and Paul is yearning for a time when human behavior will be honorable and not profane. Jesus’ apocalyptic message in Luke’s Gospel would point us to the Son of Man rescuing the righteous at the end of time. I have the same yearnings and longings and desires for the manifestation of the holy in our world, but I really don’t think these are the answers to our questions about Advent.

If only we lived in such a world where there were no more wars, no quarreling and jealousy. If only we “abound[ed] in love for one another and for all.” If only God would come and rescue the world from itself. If only … if only. The fact is that we don’t live, and can’t live, in a world of “if only.” We live in a world where life “is.” This is God’s creation with all its good and bad, evil and righteousness, and we must remember that we are made in God’s image and called to be alive in God’s divine power.

It is easy to look outward at the faults of the world. We can blame governments for wars, corporations for greed and materialism, and the people around us for quarreling and jealousy. But when we look in a mirror we see just ourselves. It would be nice if we could count on the Son of Man to come and bring judgment upon the world and rescue us from the plight that we have gotten ourselves into. But I think Jesus was telling us something more than that. I think Jesus was talking about awakening in each one of us the same divine power that was awakened in him.

So how do we live in that tension between the call of the spirit and the call of the world? How do we use this time of Advent to prepare ourselves for the incarnation? How do we access this sacred rhythm?

I think the first step is to become, and to stay, conscious of oneself and the world around you. Remember this is Advent. Remember this is based on an ancient and sacred rhythm. Remind yourself that it is Advent and that you are preparing to know the sacred presence of God alive within you. Let go of that which numbs you and keeps you unconscious. Make room for the holy by discarding the profane. Look in the mirror and see the living presence of God. Look at your neighbor and see Jesus. Identify your attitudes and prejudices that keep you from executing justice and righteousness in your own world of family and friends and neighbors and community. Live honorably by not labeling others as dishonorable. With an awakened consciousness be curious and see the world, and your place in it, in a new way.

As I said before, it is a primary element of my faith and theology that God is alive in each of us, just as God was alive in Jesus. Therefore, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God’s Son, we are celebrating the manifestation of the sacred in human form. Embedded in everything Jesus does and says is the proclamation that we are made in the image of God. The Incarnation is not just about Jesus, it is also about all humanity, and about each one of us. At Christmas we are celebrating the birth of Jesus, but we are also celebrating that divine power of God coming alive … over and over again … in each one of us.

This is the first Sunday of Advent. We enter the season of preparation for the Incarnation. The world wants us to prepare for a Christmas that has been co-opted to meet the needs of the world. We are caught in the tension between the call of the spirit and the call of the world. I encourage you to be open to another rhythm in the midst of the beat of the world. Live into the call of the spirit so that you can celebrate the divine power of God alive in your own life. God gave us Jesus to show what that life might look like. The power of God came alive in Jesus. It can come alive in you, also.

Amen.