

1 Advent
December 2, 2018

**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 starts a new liturgical year for the Church. This begins our journey toward Christmas ... the Feast of the Incarnation. The Advent wreath is lit with one candle, and one more will be lighted each Sunday until Christmas. There is even a special calendar for this season. So, this is the season of Advent. This is how the Church sees this season that leads up to the Feast of the Incarnation.

However, a retail economist sees this season through different eyes. Today is December 2. That means that, including today, there are 23 shopping days until Christmas. Everywhere there are holiday decorations ... trees, wreaths, and lights. The sales numbers for Black Friday are higher than in past years, and many online retailers began their sales well before Cyber Monday ... so retailers are expecting a good year. That is how much of the world see these few weeks 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? 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.

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 may be surprising to some that the birth of Jesus was not celebrated at all until several hundred years after he lived. The primary holy day for the earliest Christians was the Day of the Resurrection ... Easter. It wasn't until the mid-fourth century that Christians began observing Jesus' birth. However, the date of the birth of Jesus was not yet consistent in the Church ... 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 ... *Sol Invictus* ... was a celebration of the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere. The winter solstice is the day that marks the longest night of the year and the beginning of the

return of the light of the sun. It made metaphorical 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.

Today, twenty to thirty percent of all retail sales for the year happen in in these weeks before Christmas. Now, 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 world's commercialism. This is Advent, and the fact is that we are ... as people of faith ...we are 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.

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 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?

In our readings this morning, 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 ... especially at this time in our history ... 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.

Secondly, I believe that we need to let go of that which numbs us and keeps us unconscious. Make room for the holy by discarding the profane. Find a way ... even if it for just one brief moment each day ... to remind yourself that you are a beloved child of God ... made in the image of God ... and look for that yearning to have the divine come alive in you. One brief moment each day ... in your car ... over a cup of coffee ... maybe even while you brush your teeth. One moment of divine meditation.

Finally, 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.

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. Remember, it comes alive in you, also.

Amen.