

**1 Advent
December 1, 2013**

**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.**

In the United States the national holiday of Thanksgiving is always the fourth Thursday of November. It was first declared Federal holiday by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 during the Civil War. Believe it or not, there were no WalMarts, Macys, Targets, Bealls, or shopping malls at the time, and so there was no Black Friday sales encroaching upon the reverential nature of this special day. However, Thanksgiving has become more about the beginning of the Christmas shopping season than it is about giving thanks to God for our blessings.

The Church has a way of counting down to Christmas as well. It is called Advent. It consists of the four Sundays before the Feast of the Incarnation. This is our first Sunday of Advent as noted by the lighting of the First Candle on our Advent wreath. For us ... as people of faith ... this is a time of anticipation and preparation for the birth of something holy in our lives.

If ever there were a time when our faith and the ways of the world were at odds with each other, this is it. For the world this isn't Advent, this is the Christmas shopping season when as much as one quarter of all consumer sales for the year are made. It is a time of conspicuous consumption and materialism all exploiting a primary religious holy day of the Christian faith.

So how do we live in this tension between the call of the spirit and the call of the world? The Church is asking us to prepare our hearts and souls for God to come alive, and the world is tempting us with more stuff. Without being a monastic stuck away in a convent somewhere can we live in both worlds? As the world calls us to profane consumption, our faith calls us to prepare for the divine power of God to become alive in each one of us.

As you well know, 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 power of God coming alive ... over and over again ... in each 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 of a shopping spree between Thanksgiving and Christmas? 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?

Maybe it has something to do with turning our world upside down. The prophet Isaiah declares:

[T]hey shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

In Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome he wrote:

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.

And in Matthew's Gospel we hear:

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Isaiah is longing for God to rule the world with justice and peace, and Paul is yearning for a time when human behavior will be honorable and not profane. Jesus' apocalyptic message in Matthew'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 there were no drunkenness and debauchery and licentiousness. 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.

I believe Paul knew this quite well. In this passage from his letter to the Christians in Rome we focus on the dishonorable behavior of drunkenness and debauchery and licentiousness. I think Paul is ridiculing these behaviors because they are ways to remain unconscious to the realities of the world. Paul says to turn your own world upside down and become conscious in your life and your spirit. Quit numbing yourself with obsessions, and addictions, and possessions. Be alive to God's creations ... all of it. And live into the image of God in which you were made.

Simply put, that is the story of Paul's own spiritual journey. Obsessed with the letter of the Law of the Jewish Torah he was unconscious to the spirit of God's law that had come alive in Jesus. He therefore persecuted those who followed after Jesus until, one day, in a blinding flash, he became fully conscious. For Paul the divine power of God had come alive in him.

In the passage from Matthew Jesus speaks of the coming of the Son of Man at an unexpected hour. Most people assume that Jesus is referring to himself when he uses the term the "Son of Man" throughout the gospels. Indeed, in many places it is obvious that the term is a self-reference. But a number of scholars are beginning to explore the possibility that Jesus may have been referring to a capacity of all human beings to connect to the holy in the same way that Jesus connected to the holy. Thus, when Jesus says, "*Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour,*" he could possibly be saying the same thing as Paul: "Become conscious to your spiritual self so that you can live fully into the image of God in which you were made."

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?

I believe the first step is to become, and stay, conscious of oneself and the world around you. Remember this is Advent. 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. Be surprised by the "*Son of Man coming at an unexpected hour.*" Identify your attitudes and prejudices that you wield like a sword and beat them into plowshares. 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. The first step is to become conscious!

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. Turn your world upside down. Become conscious! 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.