

First Sunday in Advent – 2013

Well, I've done it again – switched gospels. Today's lectionary Advent gospel reading is all about the end – again. And, as you know, I have a problem calling end-time gospels the good news of our salvation. If, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, anxiety is love's greatest killer, then anxiety about God's love, when God dwells with us as Emmanuel, God with us, damages our love relationship with God. Beings who love us, truly love us, simply don't destroy us. That is not the way love works. We should not need to worry that if we make a mistake – which we will b/c we are human- God is coming after us with a large portion of divine wrath. If our parent/spouse, etc. don't behave that way, neither should our creator. So there, I've said all I'm going to say about it.

Instead, I've chosen a gospel reading that sort of paraphrases "The Magnificat." Instead of living in dread fear of God, our gospel today says that during Advent, we should "prepare to walk hand in hand with God," because we are really that close with our divine creator.

When we were little, we were rather taught that Advent was another Lent, although shorter; and that we needed to give up stuff in order to get ready for Jesus. Now, we hear that too many people "rush the season" which makes Christmas, they say and believe, meaningless and commercial.

I know people begin thinking about Christmas around Halloween. I know that Christmas movies were available on cable last week. People have been posting lovely, nostalgic pictures on Facebook about the magic of Christmas. And even though we might begin celebrating too early for some folk's tastes, I do think that the power of Christmas is just so absolutely overwhelming, most of us simply can't resist its power. Who can resist God, however and whenever God comes to us? It should really be enough to prepare for God's grand entrance into humanity and not worry about the details.

I rather think of Advent as the last month of pregnancy which has very adventy qualities such as anticipation and expectancy. The baby, whose elbows and knees and behind and hiccups are actually palpable, has become more and more of a reality. He/she can be born at any time now

and be healthy. The last month is baby shower month. It's a time to finish up the nursery and get the house in order because things will never be the same. It's a time when every pain, every pull, every leak leads the mother to wonder, "Is this the day when my baby arrives?" Who will my baby look like? With my first child, I remember kneeling before the dresser in intense expectation, and repeatedly going through the little clothes I had neatly folded and placed there, wondering about the little baby I would be so happy to see after nine long months. I can still remember some of the clothes.

And so, like the later stages of pregnancy, Advent should be a time of singing and dancing and Christmas parties and celebration as our psalm indicates. We should be rejoicing! Our baby is coming! He/she is almost here! All the signs are pointing to a very, very happy occasion, not a disaster or a judgment. It's ok for us to celebrate in advance. Let's get ready! We can barely contain our excitement! This birthday will, indeed, be the day that God has made!

Because of this party atmosphere, as our gospel says, we are filled with the news of good things, our favor with God, and faithful trust in the gentle shadow of the most high. What a blessing this is! Why can't we just take it all on face value and be rejoice and be happy? Why parse it to the nth degree? Why be anxious?

I was talking about this with my youngest son, Ben the other day while we were taking a break from demolishing the kitchen. We began with Halloween. There are so many people who object to celebrating Halloween because of its alleged inception in witchcraft or worry that we've taken the "Christ out of Christmas." Whatever was once true about Halloween is no longer true today. What is true today is that kids love to get dressed up and go trick or treating. The holiday is just about kids having fun, nothing more.

And so why tarnish one's own fun and holiday experience by worrying that some people are not observing Advent the way observant Christians are supposed to? Why should anyone care? God doesn't. Ben, who is 25 and rarely goes to church said quite fervently at the conclusion of our conversation, "I just love Christmas!" Included in that statement was his own interpretation of Advent, the season of

expectancy and anticipation and happiness. I daresay that he'll continue the tradition when he has his own family even if it might differ from ours.

It remains important that people "love" Christmas, however they define or observe it, whether they listen to "Jingle Bell Rock" or "O Holy Night" during Advent, cover their lawns with those blow up balloons or put a lone white candle in their front windows.

Love, however it is celebrated, makes all sorts of wonderful things happen.

Loving the holiday means that we engage in all sorts of loving preparations, where we remember our family and our friends. And we engage in loving activities, we are doing God's work.

First of all, we might purchase gifts and try to find something meaningful for our families and friends. My 39 year- old niece posted on Facebook last week how much she loved a tee shirt I bought for her from the National Wildlife Federation when she was a teenager. Cindy loved animals and worked in a vet's office when she was in high school. I remember being so totally impressed that she could tell the difference between male and female crickets by the length of their legs. I never knew how much she loved the animal tee shirt I bought for her all those many years ago until I saw the Facebook notice. She made my day.

Secondly, we might decorate our homes to make them inviting to our families and our guests. We might put up lights to make our neighborhoods look festive. There is a house around the corner on Bloomfield Ave. that is amazingly decorated. It's a pleasure looking at it. Some blocks down in the city string lights across the street from second story window to second story window making the entire block ablaze with Christmas cheer. It must take hours and days to put on the show. For me, it's heart-warming to know that the householders are doing this not only for their own families, but for other families who enjoy the lights and the good cheer.

Thirdly, we might be cookie bakers and food preparers. That too, takes hours and days. Think of all those wonderful bakers who prepare all

sorts of different, delicious cookies, decorate trays and send them off lovingly as gifts to family and friends!

We go out as a family the Saturday after Thanksgiving to purchase our Christmas trees at a farm in Collegeville. We've been doing this for years. Now my daughter-in-law's sister's family comes along as well. After we choose our tree and look at the trains we see every year and get our "free" cup of hot chocolate, we go to a restaurant on Ridge Pike for lunch.

There are those who might say we are "rushing the season," or doing Christmas in Advent by shopping, baking, decorating, and partying. Or, that we are celebrating at the wrong time and should wait until after Christmas. This advice ignores the fact the wonder and excitement that are part and parcel of anticipation.

All I know is that Advent/Christmas would be far less wonderful if we did not engage in this activity on the Saturday after Thanksgiving when we are all together. In the end, this is probably all that matters if it makes a twenty-five year old guy revel in his love of Christmas.

So, go ahead and prepare your own big, fat Christmas during Advent because it mirrors God's big, fat love. Celebrate with family and friends. Get ready for the big day when we remember how God so loved the world that God sent love, love's very self to dwell among us. Rejoice and be glad – as much as you want, because if love is in our heart of hearts, our hands will rise in prayer rather than judgment or anger. If we truly love and care for one another – all God's children- so that love flows pressed down and flowing from God's lap to ours and to the world, then God, God's very self, will dwell among us and we will never need to be afraid or anxious again.

Happy Advent!

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