

The Advent Invitation

Today is the first Sunday in Advent in many churches, though not in all. The Orthodox Churches begin Advent earlier, observing a full 40 day period of preparation for the celebration of Christmas. On the other end of the spectrum, some non-liturgical churches don't observe Advent at all.

But I like Advent and have come to appreciate it more and more as I grow older and, I hope, wiser. Advent is an invitation and an important opportunity to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord. And, although we should always be ready and watching for His coming; realistically, it is impossible for us to maintain the same intensity day after day and year after year. As living human beings our ardor fluctuates. Our attention wavers. We are easily distracted by many things and by other concerns. The church fathers recognized this reality and structured the church year to account for our lapses. They found it helpful to designate special times throughout the year such as Lent and Advent as times of repentance and spiritual renewal, times to refresh our spiritual memories and to call us back to our first love.

The apostle John, writing to the church at Laodicea, hears the Lord calling the church there to attention: In Revelation 3:15-20, the Lord says:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

I was thinking some more this week about the rich young ruler we were talking about last Sunday. Jesus was giving him an important invitation, or as we put it last week, "the chance of a lifetime." He was being invited to rid himself of his idol and chief distraction, which was his wealth, and become an active follower

2

of the Lord. Sadly, he turned down the invitation. He missed out on the joy of following Jesus because he refused to turn away from his idol and begin the journey.

This morning we find ourselves with another opportunity to move forward in our relationship with the Lord, but if this Advent is going to do us any good several things need to happen. First of all, we need to take stock of where we are and decide to change. We need to decide to set aside this time that has been set aside for us and purpose in our hearts and minds to reach out to the Lord who is reaching out to us.

I don't know about you but I know my spiritual temperature right now is tepid at best. I need a fresh touch from the Lord. I need fresh fire in my belly, a renewed sense of purpose. I need this Advent journey. How about you? How do you think the Lord would assess your spiritual temperature this morning? Are you red hot, ice cold, or somewhere in the middle? If you are like me and have to confess that you are somewhere in the middle, notice what the Lord says: He says, "because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth." I believe the Lord is warning us and inviting us to warm up to Him during this Advent season, and the first thing He is asking us to do is to draw near to Him, to seek after Him. Will you join me on this quest? Will you commit yourself to the journey that doesn't end until we find ourselves in the presence of the Living Lord? Let us agree that we need and that we will make this journey. **By the Lord's invitation, we begin this journey.**

The first thing we need to do in responding to the Advent invitation is to acknowledge our need and agree to begin the journey. The second thing we need to do is to search. The shepherds determined to go to Bethlehem and see the thing that the Angel had proclaimed to them. The wise men determined to follow the new star that had appeared to its destination. We need to search.

Far too often the truth is that we are spiritual couch potatoes. We would like God to make Himself and His will known to us in fresh ways, but we don't make much effort toward bringing this to pass. We practice a very passive spirituality and wonder why we are not more blessed. But, there is nothing passive about the spirituality of the shepherds and wise men. There is nothing passive about the words of Jesus in Luke 11:9 that say, "Ask

3

and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." There is nothing passive about Paul's words when he says in Philippians 3:14, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." There is nothing passive in the Lord's challenge to the church at Laodicea when He says, "be earnest, and repent." It seems to me that we need to be much more intentional and aggressive about drawing near to the Lord. Through fervent prayer, individual and corporate searching in God's word, and through acts of worship and service, we need to actively pursue a warmer faith. **Let us seek so we can find.**

We need to see that we need Advent and decide to begin this Advent journey. Then we need to pursue it intentionally and actively, to go after it with a sense of urgency. The third aspect to our Advent journey is the call to rearrange our priorities and to empty our lives of those things that get in the way of our search for Him. The shepherds left most if not all of their sheep behind on the hillside when they went to search for Jesus in Bethlehem. The wise men could only carry so much on their camels when they left Persia and set out for Judea. Hebrews 12:1 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

John in Revelation 3:17-18ab, says, "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness."

What John indicates here is that the believers at Laodicea had begun to trust in the wrong things, and that those things were keeping them from receiving what was real and right. We are not sure about the specifics but it seems that they had grown comfortable with their lukewarmness. They were doing enough religious things to keep themselves under the illusion that everything was OK. They were experiencing enough success to allow them to think God was pleased with their performance. They were comforted by their traditions and by going through the motions of being a church, but it was all fluff, meringue on the pie--nice to look at but not very nourishing. The Holy Spirit was calling the church at Laodicea to turn away from false securities

and "go for the gold," gold refined in the furnace of affliction, and to put on white robes made white by the blood of the lamb.

The picture I get of the Laodicean believers is that somewhere along the line they had lost their willingness to risk anything for the sake of the Lord. They were no longer reaching out to others, no longer actively contending against evil in their community, no longer proclaiming the gospel to the lost. They had turned inward, seeking to protect the church rather than taking any risks to expand it. I don't know about you, but I'm feeling some conviction here. We are worrying too much about ourselves and not enough about those around us who are lost, like sheep without a shepherd. This Advent journey will require us to give up our apathy and reposition ourselves to care about the others for whom Christ died. **Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost. We will find Him when we conform to His purpose.**

In order to heed the invitation of Advent, we need to recognize our spiritual poverty and desire more of God. We need to actively pursue the Lord in prayer and in the word and in worship and fellowship with one another. We need to reach out to the Lord until He gives us hearts to reach others.

Finally, on this first Sunday of Advent, we need to pursue the ability to see the presence of the Lord all around us and in all we do. His name is "Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." Advent is an invitation to see Him where we have not seen Him before and to see Him when we would not see Him unless we were diligently looking. Notice that John says in Revelation 3, at the end of verse 18, (buy) "salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."

You know, it's funny how God works. While He delights to surprise us with His presence I have found that He usually doesn't surprise us with His presence unless we are looking for Him. He wants us to seek Him and He wants us to find Him, but He reserves the right to show up in unexpected people and in unexpected places. He chooses to come to earth through a carpenter's bride and to make His first appearance in a stable. That should give us some idea how He operates. He wants us to seek for Him and He wants us to find Him, but He also wants to appear where we least expect Him to appear.

Finding this year's church Christmas Tree was sort of like

that. I wasn't sure my old Christmas tree farm was in business anymore and I really didn't want to go to any of the more popular places people go to get trees, so when Phyllis Heaton told me that she thought that the husband of a woman she prays with raised Christmas trees, I was intrigued. Phyllis gave me a name and a number and I made the call. Sure enough they had trees and were willing to have me come and pick one out. So off I went up the mountain to Dysart and over the river and through the woods and on one old Indian trail and then another until I found the tree farm on the St Augustine Rd. By the time I reached my destination, the sun was shining and I had the sense that something special was going on. The woman who Phyllis prays with invited me into her home and showed me a painting that the Lord had instructed her to paint in a vision. Amidst the lovely landscaping outside the house were scattered plaques with Scripture verses, which led one on a devotional walk through her gardens. The husband, who is 85 years young, hopped on his four-wheeler and led me out among the Christmas trees and showed me his Douglas firs. I didn't like the ones he first showed me, so I walked further down the hillside. I was considering several trees off to my right. I didn't like them either, and I was beginning to doubt that I would find a tree to suit. But then all of a sudden I turned around and saw just the right one. The funny thing was that I didn't see it when I was walking toward it earlier. It was if it hadn't been there or that it had been invisible until that moment. But as soon as I saw it, I said "that's the one!" I'll take that one. With that the 85-year-old gentleman pulled out his chainsaw and cut it down. We loaded it on the cart behind his four-wheeler and took it to the shed where the tree shaker and baler were. The man lifted the tree with ease, put it on the shaker and then pulled the cord on the gasoline engine that drove the baler. I asked him if I was to pay him at the shed or wait until we got back down to the house. He said, "there will be no charge. I would like to donate this tree to your church if you don't mind." We had a long talk about the Lord after that and I prayed for him and his wife. I went looking for a Christmas tree and found a brother. I went looking for a Christmas tree and found the presence of the Lord.

I believe we are all invited to encounter the presence of the Lord this Advent season, but we need to be willing to make the journey, to seek for Him diligently, to travel light, and remember that He's likely to show up when and where we least expect to find Him. Let us begin our Advent journey.

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Sermon for December 2, 2007

The Invitation of Advent

Revelation 3:14-22

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