

Luke 19:28-40
1 Sunday in Advent, 2006
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I don't know about you, but we've already put up our Christmas tree - - decorations, lights, and all. Gingerbread houses have appeared at the History Center, and Christmas displays have popped up all over the neighborhood. Next week, we have a big Christmas party at work, and then, a week later, we'll have another. We've had a little snow blowing in the air, today's the cookie walk, and I'm ready to sing a carol or two.

Strangely enough, though, the traditional gospel lesson for today, the First Sunday in Advent is the same as that of Palm Sunday - - Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It seems, in a way, wrong. Out of place. Say what you will about Christ's coming at the end of time, but Advent's all about preparing our hearts for the coming of the Christchild. Children everywhere are already rehearsing for Christmas programs . . getting ready to reenact the story of Mary, with child, riding on a donkey into Bethlehem; and instead, we're saddled with a story about Jesus, riding on a donkey, into Jerusalem. In Advent, we should be moving towards a celebration of our Lord's birth in Bethlehem; and , instead, we hear a story about our Lord moving toward his death in Jerusalem. We should all be going to the theater, to see the new movie, "The Nativity," and, instead, we're treated to what looks like the prequel to Mel Gibson's "Passion."

But, maybe there's something we can learn. Something which, like Mary, we can take with us, and ponder in our hearts. We see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, and we sing, "Ride on, ride on in Majesty. In lowly pomp, ride on to die." For this reason our Lord came from heaven. For this reason, the Son of God became the Son of Mary. Our trip to Bethlehem must continue to Jerusalem. Or else Christmas loses its meaning and lasting value.

Indeed, Christmas seems, for so many, to be a holiday about nothing. Or else, about the things of this world. Many, I think, have completely lost their bearings. I remember, as a kid, going to a relatives' house for Christmas; though baptized, they had drifted away from the church. I remember watching as my cousins opened up Christmas present after Christmas present. Each of the children was given a television set, which, in those days was big stuff . . even as plasma tv's are all the rage now. And, as I watched them opening up the presents, I was, at first, a little jealous. But, as the day wore on, something didn't seem right. Something was missing. Or, more precisely, someone was missing. For all the gifts, and celebration, there was nothing to it. There was no Christ, and no Mass. No mention of our Lord's birth, no celebration of his birth in a church service. It was hollow. And, I was left feeling empty inside.

In our society, Christmas has become a largely secular, worldly affair. We celebrate Christmas, and we even fight for the right to say, "Merry Christmas," at places like Wal-Mart, but we rarely talk about why Christmas is supposed to be merry. The absence of Christ has left for many a big hole, an emptiness that needs to be filled. And so folks try to fill this void with man-made traditions. Rather than tell the story of Christ, the world offers

countless others. Off the top of my head, I can think of Dickens' Christmas Carol, The Little Match Girl, The Grinch who Stole Christmas, The Year without a Santa Claus, the Nutcracker, the Night Before Christmas, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, not to mention, "It's a Wonderful Life" and "A Miracle on 34th St." The world has its own hymnal as well, with Christmas hymns ranging from Elvis' "Blue Christmas," to Bing's "White Christmas." Nat King Cole sings about "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire, And Gene Autry still can be heard singing of the advent of Santa Claus, coming down Santa Claus lane. And that's just the classics; since then, there have been more than a few supplements.

Now, I like a lot of those stories, and enjoy some of those songs. But, if that's all there is, we don't really have much to celebrate. There's just not a lot of there, there. And, it's no wonder why Christmas has a tendency to fall flat.

But, if we're honest, Christmas often falls flat for us Christians, too. Perhaps, we should blame the angels for raising our expectations. Perhaps it's that glorious song of old, From Angels bending near to earth to touch their harps of Gold: "Peace on Earth, Good Will Towards Men."

I don't know about you, but it's pretty hard to find peace on earth, much less good will to men. One of my favorite tv spots was that old Coca-cola commercial brought out at Christmas, in which young people joined in chorus, "I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony." The hippies of the 60's really thought that with a good attitude, and a few folk songs, they could usher in an age of peace. Though their dreams seem silly now, we still pray for peace. But for 2000 years we've had nothing but wars and rumors of wars. Again and again, the angels said, "Don't be afraid.." And yet, we live in, what seems to be an age of anxiety; a low level fear lurks just below the surface. Some of us have friends and relatives serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. What if Iran or North Korea get nukes? And, God forbid, actually use them? What if someone detonates a dirty bomb, or poisons the water supply? Earlier this week the famous physicist and thinker Stephen Hawking said that the human race should start planning for life on another planet, in preparation for the time when our own planet becomes uninhabitable. Peace on earth? Not so much. Doom seems, if not imminent, inevitable.

And so, at Christmas, when peace on earth seems unattainable on a large, global scale, we retreat, and attempt to find peace on a smaller scale, at home with family and friends. Many folks, even Christian folks, will say that Christmas, at its heart, is about friends and family. When I used to ask my mother what she wanted for Christmas, she would say, "A Happy Family." Now, when my kids ask my wife what she wants, lo and behold, she says the same thing: "A Happy Family." And, this side of heaven, the family is about the best gift there is.

But, families, too can be turned into idols. Indeed, many Christians don't even go to church on Christmas, because they want to be with their families. Many churches don't even offer services on Christmas. Those that do are surprisingly empty.

And, even when we are with our families, we don't always find peace. At any given time, there are assaults from without, and tensions within. Christmas is great, but the bills aren't so wonderful. Throw in anxieties over your job, your children's struggles at school, ailing parents, chronic medical conditions, disputes with the in-laws, the loss of a loved one, a broken relationship, and there's a lot of sadness and strife. Some of this sadness is because we live in a fallen world, and truth be told, some of this strife is of our own making . . . bad choices we've made, people we've hurt, relationships we've damaged. Life can get so messy, and so much of the mess is the result of our own doing.

Where then is peace to be found? Not in the things of this world. Not even in the good gifts of the world, such as the family, but only in the Christchild. And not in some Precious-Moments Christchild, but in the Child who was born to die. A real world savior, for a world with real problems. The Babe of Bethlehem who would set his sights on Jerusalem. He whose birth was lit by a star, came to meet a death that was marked by darkness. Because, in mercy, he saw our problem, and offered his life as its solution. Took our sin, our loneliness, our sorrow and guilt upon himself.

And so at our Lord's birth, the angels sang, "Peace on earth, good will toward men." But as Jesus came riding on a donkey, into Jerusalem, the crowds sang . . . 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in Heaven, Gloria in Excelsis Deo.'

What do we mean when we sing of Peace in heaven? It's not just a description of angels playing their harps upon the clouds; it's good news. There's peace in heaven because God is at peace with us.

And, we are right, this time of year, to pause, and ask, "How could God be at peace with a world that is constantly at war? How could he be at peace with a world that ignores him and takes his blessings for granted. How could he be at peace with the world that so blatantly disregards his will? How could he be at peace with a world that has taken the birthday of his Son, and turned it into just another time to eat, drink, and be merry? How could he be at peace with me, a sinner?

If we are to recover Christmas, and make it real and meaningful, we must, I think, recover Advent. Advent is a season of preparation . . . not simply of our homes, meals, and presents, but a time of preparation for our hearts. A time to recognize why our Lord came in the first place. A time to recognize why that infant child, born to be king, would one day receive a crown of thorns.

Hark! A Thrilling Voice is Sounding! "Christ is near," we hear it say. "Cast away the works of darkness, All you children of the day."

Cast away the works of darkness. Look at your lives, and turn once more away from sin. What's on your heart today? Are your hearts set merely on the things of this world? On new cars and new homes? On toys and vacations? On securing your financial future? Are you giving to the poor, and to the church. Is there room in your heart for the Christchild?

And so, with the disciples who lined the streets of Jerusalem, we sing, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." And we recognize that he comes to die for our sins and self-centeredness. And so we sing, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." And we remember that we have been baptized into the name of the Lord." And, returning to our baptism, we don't simply cry out against the evils of this world, but we repent of the evils of our own heart. We don't simply bemoan the wars of the world, but we recognize the troubles we have caused.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord and takes away our sin and sorrow. Blessed is he who by his death makes peace with God, and gives us peace, in our hearts.

Yes, Advent is a time for repentance; a time of sadness over sin. But it is also a time of hope. For if we are sinners, we have a Savior. If things seem bad, and if the end is near, so also, in Christ, is there a new beginning. And, if we have made a mess with our lives, Christ has come to make things right. And with him there is bright future.

For the world, Christmas is a big game of pretend . . . of creating an idyllic world that doesn't exist. Speaking of a peace that does not exist.

But, for us, Christmas is life itself. Therefore, in this season of Advent, let us prepare our hearts, once more, for our Lord's coming. Take advantage, if you can, of the midweek services, and strengthen yourself against the onslaught of the season. Ground yourself. Get your head in the game, and remind yourself what this season, what Christmas, is all about. Think about your own Christmas traditions, and ask what role Christ plays. And, then, go ahead and mark your calendar, and prepare to come to the house of your Lord on Christmas day; to celebrate God's greatest gift, and to remember that you are a member of the heavenly Family.

As for the lights and decorations, the cookies and the family gatherings, enjoy. They are gifts from God. But this year, let's keep it real. Let's keep our eyes on Christ, where true joy and peace are to be found.

Amen.