

The World Needs Advent

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
November 27, 2011 at Peace UCC, Greensboro, NC

So how do you get ready for Christmas? Maybe a little shopping, or a lot of shopping? Maybe some cooking? Peanut butter balls, cookies, fruit cakes? Maybe some decorating.

Before moving to the Triad we were living in a log cabin so Zephaniah and I would go out into the woods looking for holly and ivy and pine. We'd spend an hour or so walking in the woods, we'd come back inside, get a fire going in the fireplace and then put on a little music (Play "Christmas Time Is Here" from Charlie Brown). Yeah. I mean does it get any more Norman Rockwell than that? The only thing missing was snow.

Now the Vince Guaraldi Trio may be a bit too melancholy for most at Christmas. Your own personal taste may differ. Perhaps a little Frank is in order. (play "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" by Frank Sinatra). Or maybe you'd like something more explicitly religious. Maybe Susan Boyle singing Away in a Manger. (play "Away in a Manger.")

But wait a second. The little Lord Jesus no crying he makes? Really? Where's that from? I don't know but I can tell you this, it's not biblical. In fact, truth be told nothing I've talked about this morning is biblical. Yes, it all captures the spirit of Norman Rockwell's Christmas, but it has little in common with a Biblical Christmas, AND, it has nothing to do with Advent.

I know. You want Bing Crosby, but Advent wants you to listen to Bad Moon Rising by John Fogerty and Creedence Clearwater Revival. Now this version is by singer/songwriter Thea Gilmore but I think she does a better job of capturing the ethos of the song. (Play "Bad Moon Rising.")

*I see a bad moon rising, I see trouble on the way;
I see earthquakes and lighting, I see bad times times today;
Don't go around tonight, cause it's bound to take your life
Cause there's a bad moon on the rise.*

Wow Jim. You sure do have a way of putting a damper on the holiday. Look folks don't blame me. I'm just telling you what St. Mark says: *Following those hard times, the sun will fade out, the moon will rise and cloud over, stars will fall out of the sky; the cosmic powers will tremble.* Now THAT's Advent.

Truth be told, the church skips right from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Oh, we go through the motions; we light 5 candles, but we never have fully embraced Advent, certainly not in America. And under no circumstances do we want to sing Advent music or hymns. We want Christmas. We want our nostalgic Christmas that's existed for about the last 75 years & we want to be told that everything is fine and wonderful and beautiful. But underneath all of the marketing and public relations ploys, Advent says very quietly but very insistently,... It's not okay. This is not the way it is supposed to be.

Last week was the last day of the church year - Christ the King Sunday - and Paula turned our attention to the values of God's Kingdom. But 1 week later, the first Sunday of Advent crashes in with its dissonance and minor keys and says, I believe in the Kingdom of God, but good Lord I'm having trouble finding it. And that is exactly what Bono is singing in U2's I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For. He believes in the Kingdom Come when all the colors of the world will be united in Jesus Christ, the one who broke the bonds of sin & carried the cross of shame. You know I believe it, he sings. But. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for. That's because he's looking for the Kingdom of God on earth. And he can't find it.

Bono, you see, is awake. He sees a world where people die because they had the bad luck to be born in the third world and he knows this isn't right. He knows that children die for the lack of a vaccine that costs a few cents to make.

And if we are awake, we too will see suffering and injustice. We will see a world where men of trust and power betray families and the church by violating children. We will see a world where a woman at a Wal-Mart on Black Friday pepper sprays 20 adults and children in a quest to get an X-Box game console. We will see with utter clarity that the poor are getting poorer. We will see a political system that is impotent even as it craves more power and the money which fuels it. We will see wars and hear rumors of war in Syria and Israel and Turkey and Iran and on the Korean peninsula. We will see a country that has lost 7 trillion dollars in real estate equity in the last 3 years. We will see people like my friend lose his house because he couldn't afford his mortgage. So why couldn't he afford his mortgage? Was he greedy? Did he buy too big of a house; a house he didn't need? No. His wife had cancer but no health insurance. She died owing over \$100,000. So he took out a second mortgage to pay her bills. He did nothing wrong and lost everything and that isn't right.

And so he says to me, Jim, where is God? He understands Isaiah when Isaiah says: "*O that you would tear open the heaven and come down.*" In other words, just once God, would you please let us know that you are more than some watchmaker who sits removed from us in the heavens. Truth be told God, there are times when life cuts us down to size and there is nothing left but a stump. Where are you? But, that is when Advent says "but."

The South mountains of North Carolina are known for their sourwoods, a scrub-like tree, and when our cabin was built a number of them were cut down. Their stumps are still there. But inevitably, new shoots spring forth from those supposedly barren stumps. I cut them back, after which they spring back to life again. Indeed, the more I cut them, the more they come back to life. THAT is a picture of Advent.

In Advent we remember that at best life prunes us and at worse cuts us down where we stand. But Advent reminds us that even on the stumpiest of stumps, new shoots can grow.

And so in Advent we start lighting candles, not because everything is bright, but because it's dark; not because everything is fine, because it isn't. We light candles in hope that hope will be kindled in us. We light candles to better see the new thing God is doing because it's easier to find the stumps than the new growth. We light candles while we wait for God to come with light. We light candles to remember that we are to be light while we wait.

I know. You want carols and lights and Christmas trees. But the world needs us to be Advent people. The world believes in waiting for the next bargain; Advent believes in waiting for the holy even though it may take a very long time. The world will engage in much busyness this season while Advent encourages us to be reflective and still. The world believes in consumption as our patriotic duty while Advent whispers, you don't really need it. The world believes Jesus belongs in a creche beside Santa. Advent believes in a Jesus who has already come and is here, right now, amongst the poor and downtrodden. The world believes in having a gazillion and 1 lights to light up your house. Advent says, you are to be the light while we're waiting. The world yearns for Burl Ives to sing a Holly Jolly Christmas. But we, we in the church sing *Veni, veni Emmanuel; captivum solve Israel*. Come O Come Emmanuel, come and save us from our captivity, our greed, our narcissism, our despair; our fear of birth pangs.

So let the world proceed with their celebration of another consumer holiday. But we, we dare not skip Advent. The world needs it too much. Indeed, we need it too much. Amen.