

THE ADVENT OF LOVE

(12/18/11)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
John 3:16-17; 13:34-35

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent, also known as Christmas Sunday. Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. It is also a time to prepare for the birth of the Christ child within our hearts.

The first Sunday of Advent we lit the candle of hope. When not only the days but also the times themselves seem enveloped in darkness, it is important to have hope. We hope for an end to international conflict. We hope for an end to terrorism. We hope we will develop the collective will and commitment to stop destroying our environment, to end the unnecessary poverty that crushes the human soul, to eradicate the unnecessary and untreated sicknesses that claim so many lives. We hope we will be able to create the kind of world, the kind of human society that God wants us to create.

We also need to have hope as individuals. Depression and despair, which are endemic in our society, are marked by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. They pull us back not only from the present but the future. They rob us not only of joy in the present moment but the conviction that we can create a meaningful and fulfilling life. When the way that lies before us seems onerous, when it takes all the courage we can muster to put one foot in front of another, when we cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel, it is hope that keeps us going.

There is a danger, however, that lurks beneath the golden glow of hope. Hope can pull us out of the reality of the present and transport us into an imaginary future. It can pull us out of that which is real, that which is here and now, and lead us into what is unreal, what has not yet happened. It can seduce us into thinking that some altered

state of affairs in the world or in our individual lives would make us happy. When this alternative state of affairs becomes both a necessary and sufficient condition for our happiness, we are establishing a set of conditions that actually prevents happiness.

This way of thinking or hoping guarantees not only unhappiness in the future, but also a lack of joy in the present. We need to face and be realistic about the reality of life in the present, both in our individual lives and in the world. We need to accept this reality, even embrace it. Only when we truly affirm our lives, with its pain and sorrow, with its triumphs and tragedies as a gift from God, will our restlessness be resolved.

The second Sunday of Advent we lit the candle of peace. We not only hope for peace on earth, we long for it. We long for an end to the kind of international conflict that resulted in the loss of over one hundred million lives in the 20th century. We long for an end to our military presence in Afghanistan. We long for peace between Israel and the Palestinians and between warring factions in Africa. Being cognizant that there is no true peace without justice, we resolve to work for peace in the world and in our nation in whatever ways we can.

We hope not only for peace in the world but also within ourselves. We long for that experience or state of inner peace. We hope for release from the demons that possess us: the anxieties that beset us, the needless worry that depresses our immune system and steals years from our lives. We know that anxiety, with its obsessive desire to control the future, robs us of life in the present. It not only pulls us out of what is real, it gives a negative or pessimistic twist to the imagined future.

We know that we are unlikely to create peace in the world if we cannot find peace within ourselves. It all begins with us. If we can create or experience inner peace, the peace that comes from a deep and fulfilling relationship with God through Christ, we can bring peace to those around us. It is just this inner peace, however, that so often eludes our grasp. The Buddhists would tell us that it eludes our grasp because it cannot be grasped. Like happiness, it is a by-product of right thinking, right

feeling, right speech, right action, right beliefs, and right prayer. When we are truly Christ-centered, the butterfly of peace will come and softly rest upon our shoulder.

Last Sunday, as we lit the candle of joy we began to see how the themes of Advent blend together like the light that spreads out from the candles of our Advent wreath. Christmas is about joy. The angels brought to the shepherds “good news of a great joy that shall be to all the people.” This great joy, which we celebrate on Christmas Eve when we close our candlelight service with the triumphant hymn, “Joy to the World,” is the birth of the Christ child both in the world and in our lives.

Joy, like peace, is not only something that we long to experience; it is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It arises out of our grounding in the Holy Spirit. When we ground our relationship with God in the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, as the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 1:16, we will “rejoice always.” Paul says we will “give thanks in all circumstances.” Note how Paul says that we will give thanks in *all* circumstances! This is because joy, like peace, is not tied to the realization of fortunate circumstances, to the advent of some imaginary state of affairs for which we long. It is an affirmation of who we are and what we have right here and now.

As I mentioned last week, this kind of joy, the joy of everyday living, is a quiet joy. It is not an ecstatic joy. It is different from jolly or even happy. It comes when we acknowledge our life, when we accept it as a gift, when we embrace it, when we move toward it, and when we love it. When we do this, we will find peace. We will find joy. And our hearts will be filled with love.

This is the message of Christmas. This is the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God is Emanuel -- God with us. Salvation is here and now. The eternal dwells within us. The kingdom of heaven is already spread upon the earth. It is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

The message of Christmas is that God chose to become human, chose to enter into our lives here and now. God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Remember,

the incarnation of the divine on earth, the blending of the spiritual and the material, did not take place in some ideal manner. The baby Jesus was born of two young parents in a relatively impoverished section of a country that was not one of the great powers of the earth. He was born in a barn. Few people witnessed this miraculous event, and few celebrated it. In fact, the powers of darkness did their best to kill him, to snuff out the light that he was bringing into the world.

Love is the heart, the central meaning of Christmas. As we heard in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John, "God so loved the world that he sent his son." God so loved the world that he became human to dwell among us. Christmas bridges or dissolves the gap between earth and heaven, between the human and the divine. It did this not only in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, it does it for us as well.

When Jesus was asked what he considered to be the Great Commandment, that which sums up or supersedes all the laws that are enumerated in the Torah, he said that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. Since love is the most intimate of feelings, the strongest of all commitments, Jesus calls us into an intimate personal relationship with God, the kind of relationship that he had with his Father.

How can we love that which we have never seen and that which we do not know? Obviously, we can't. This is why God chose to become human. As the prologue of the Gospel of John tells us, the Logos, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. God revealed himself to us in Jesus of Nazareth. He showed us what he looks like in human form. He did this so we can not only know him but also love him.

Jesus tells us that we need to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. The initiative in this relationship, however, does not lie with us. God has already taken the initiative. Our love of God arises in response to God's love for us. This is the message of Christmas.

Once we realize God's great love for us, God's great love for all God's children, for all God's creatures, we will be moved to not only feel but express this love in our relationships with each other. Jesus tells us that the first commandment is that we should love God. The second, he tells us, is "like unto it." We should love our neighbor as ourselves. We should love our neighbor as God loves our neighbor, even when our neighbor is a pariah, as repulsive to us as a Samaritan was to a Jew.

Paul tells his parishioners in the church at Corinth that love is the greatest of all the spiritual gifts. He tells us that love is patient, that it is kind. When we love, our egocentricity, the self-centeredness that leads to arrogance will dissolve. We will not become caught up in grasping, in attachments, in the desire for control over others. We will not even become caught up in the desire to control life. This love, a love not only of our fellow human beings but also of the life that God has given us, is strong; it enables us to endure, to bear whatever life brings our way.

Paul tells us that without love we are nothing. This is true not only in relation to our wife or husband, our children or our parents, our relatives or our friends. I think what Paul says applies to life. If we accept the life that is ours to live, if we embrace it, and if we can come to love it, we will find the peace that passes all understanding. We will also find that we become more loving toward our fellow human beings.

We know how difficult and painful it is for us when we have no hope. We know how difficult and painful it is for us when we cannot find inner peace. We know how flat and insipid life can be without joy. And we know how lonely life can be when we do not love. As Paul says, we become a "noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." If we do not have love, we are nothing. Without love, even our good deeds, even our religious observances, bring little benefit to our soul.

Love is the heart of Christmas. Christmas begins with God's love for us, for all of us, for each and every one of us. The incarnation was an expression of this love. God's love calls forth a response in us. Once we realize that God loves us, once we

experience this great love, we are moved to love God in return. Our relationship with God will deepen. Then, consequently and inevitably, we will find ourselves more loving of our neighbor, our brothers and sisters, for we are all children of God.

This Christmas, let us celebrate the most wonderful gift of all, the incarnation, the expression of God's decision to become flesh and dwell among us, bringing light and life to all who open their hearts to him. Let us also help to incarnate hope, peace, joy, and love in our lives that we might strengthen their creative presence in the world. Let us remember that since the first Christmas took place in the very humblest of dwellings, it can take place within our humble hearts.

In 1642, George Weissel wrote a hymn based on the Psalm 24 entitled "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates." The words are as follows:

*Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates,
Behold, the King of Glory waits;
The King of Kings is drawing near;
The Savior of the world is here!*

*Fling wide the portals of your heart;
Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer, and love, and joy.*

*Redeemer, come! I open wide
My heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide,
Let me Thy inner presence feel;
Thy grace and love in me reveal.*

If the birth of Christ does not take place within the portals, within the temples of our hearts, and then transform our lives, a thousand Christmases will leave the world unchanged. Let us open our hearts to Christmas.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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