

"The Forgotten Theme of Advent"

Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11

December 14, 2014

3rd Sunday in Advent

"Just you wait until your Father gets home!" That was a phrase that would strike terror into the hearts of my generation and older. It meant you were in big trouble for something you had done. The father was the dispenser of justice and administrator of punishment in those days and he would be coming to do both of those things at some as yet undetermined time in the future. So, it was not very good to hear your mother say that to you. All you could do was to wait in fear or try to hide.

Some think that this is also the mood set by Advent when we focus so much attention on the second coming of our Lord. People get the idea that the message of Advent is the spiritual equivalent of what I said before: "Just you wait until your Father gets home!" only it's been altered somewhat to, "Just you wait until your Lord returns!" We may have the same feeling of being in big trouble for what we've done. The Lord is coming to dispense justice and administer punishment. From Scripture, we know this to be true. The question is: how do we handle that?

Many people would try to ignore the prospect of the Lord coming for a final judgment day or deny the reality of it all together. Others, who fear that this world *is* coming to an end, attempt to cover such negative thoughts by living under the philosophy of "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we may die." Nowhere is that more evident than in the Christmas season where people spend so much time (to the point of exhaustion) and so much money (to the point of bankruptcy) trying to immerse themselves in happiness in an attempt to drown any negative thoughts about what the future may bring.

Even in the church, this same kind of thinking emerges. I think there are some within the church as a whole who think the church has an entirely too negative of a message. All this talk about sin only makes people feel bad about themselves and injures their self-esteem, they say. All this talk

about judgment only needlessly scares people, they say. As a result of these misconceptions, all people hear at times is a negative message.

For example, when someone uses the phrase, "Don't preach at me!", it always means something bad. It means you're going to tell me what I've done wrong. Or, when someone is informed that "the pastor is coming to see them", it often inspires the same fear or unpleasantness that the phrase, "just wait until your father gets home" does. The pastor is going to come and criticize me for something. This influences how we observe certain things. We want to try and rid ourselves of that "negativity." When we come to a season like Advent, we would much rather skip over all this negative "judgment and doomsday stuff" and get to Christmas so we can sing the beautiful carols and see the cute story of a baby born in a manger.

However, regardless of how we handle the matter of our Lord's return, a more important issue is how *He* handles it. First of all, there is no way to deny the reality of the negative aspects of our Lord's return. There will be a final judgment in which sinners will be condemned to everlasting torment in the flames of hell, eternally separated from the presence of God. Jesus tells about that judgment in Matthew 25 where he compares it with a shepherd separating sheep from goats. Jesus will say to those who have been condemned, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matt. 25:41) There will also be a complete and total destruction of the universe and everything in it. As St. Peter reminded us in the epistle reading last Sunday: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." (2 Peter 3:10)

These are scary things involved in the second coming of our Lord. There is no way that we can deny, minimize, or sugar coat them. They are realities. Judgment and condemnation for sin is a reality, whether we like to talk about it or not. The destruction of the world is a reality whether we like to think about it or not. It is a fearful message for all sinners, even us, to hear, yet one that, nevertheless, must be heard and paid attention to.

Yet it is not the only message that is to be heard and proclaimed, even during the Advent season. The Advent season was established as a solemn time for contemplation over the sinfulness of humanity, which was the reason for Jesus' first coming, and the judgment of humanity, which will be the reason for Jesus' second coming. Part of this observation includes the use of purple (now blue) candles in an Advent wreath every week. The dark color symbolized the somber mood of the season. But the third week of Advent was always characterized by a pink candle. The lighter color reminds us that this season also has a different mood and a different message, both of which are characterized by exuberant and unrestrained joy.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah is telling of the coming Messiah and the message He would bring. It was not first and foremost a negative message of judgment and condemnation. Rather, the Messiah says, "The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." Hear that? There is GOOD news coming from God through His Anointed One.

What kind of good news? It is not economic or political good news, neither of which last very long. Rather, this is spiritual good news that will have eternal consequences. It is that the Messiah will bind up the brokenhearted. Those who are deeply grieved over their guilt will have it removed so that their hearts will be at peace because they are at peace with your God. The Messiah will proclaim liberty to the captives. Those who have been captive to the control of Satan and his evil power will be freed from that control through the forgiveness of their sins. The Messiah will proclaim the opening of prison to those who are bound. Those who have been imprisoned by death will be released.

The Messiah will proclaim the year of the Lord's favor as opposed to the day of vengeance. In other words, there will be ample time for people throughout the world to hear this good news, believe the good news, and receive the benefits of this good news before the day of judgment comes.

The Messiah will proclaim a great exchange. In exchange for the filth and blackness of the ashes of sin, He will give a headdress of beauty and holiness. In exchange for mourning, He will give the oil of gladness. In exchange for an attitude of despair, He will give the garment of praise.

The Messiah did come as prophesied and did make these proclamations. The Gospel of Luke has this account of Jesus.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus was claiming the title of Messiah and the role of Messiah. But the Messiah had to do more than say nice words. Like any promises or proclamations that you or I might make, He had to back them up with actions. And that's what He did by being born a human. The Bible says, "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." (Gal. 4:4-5) He placed Himself under the Law of God to fulfill it where we had failed and to take the prescribed punishment which we deserved. He took our guilt upon His heart. He placed Himself under bondage to sin and Satan and went into the darkness of death and hell. And He successfully beat them all by rising from the dead victoriously on Easter Sunday.

The good news He still proclaims through His Church is for you, for me, and for all people in this world. Your broken heart is bound up. You have freedom from Satan's curse and control. You have been released from the prison of death and hell. You have the crown of Christ's righteousness instead of the ashes of your sin. You have the oil of gladness to fill your life instead of mourning. You have the garment of praise to wrap around you, even in the worst of times, instead of despair.

As we wait for our Lord to return, we neither fear nor dread it. We do not try to hide from it or avoid it. We see beyond the negative aspects. We anticipate it with joy and embrace it when it comes. For us who know the Messiah Jesus, His return is not a negative courtroom scene, but rather is a joyful wedding celebration in which the marriage of Christ to His bride, the Church, takes place. We, who are part of that bride, have the attitude expressed at the end of our text: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

We don't have to glom on to the world's sometimes desperate attempt to have happiness at this time of year. Remember the forgotten theme of Advent: of joy as symbolized by the pink candle in our Advent wreath and proclaimed in our readings today. This changes our attitude about the present and our outlook for the future. "Just you wait until your Lord returns!" What a joyful promise, rather than a dreary threat. He *is returning*..and we can't wait! Amen.