

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 4, 2022 (2nd Sunday in Advent, Year A)  
Matthew 3:1-12  
Romans 14:4-13  
Isaiah 11:1-10

Advent is about preparing for an arrival: CHRIST'S arrival. The word "Advent" ACTUALLY MEANS "coming" or "arrival."

We tend to EQUATE Advent with CHRISTMAS, and expect to jump RIGHT into it after Thanksgiving. And that would certainly be in keeping with our CULTURE, where the COMING of Christmas—not so much Christmas ITSELF, but the COMING of Christmas—is celebrated with stores SELLING and people BUYING. But exactly WHAT is it that we anticipate? WHAT are we getting READY for?

The neighbors of the Erskine Presbyterian Church in Hamilton, Ontario have a pretty good idea...NOW. A few years ago, they were getting SUSPICIOUS. There was a mysterious cardboard box sitting on the church steps – a plain, unmarked box, tightly sealed. It had been there for hours.

It seemed like the right thing to do in this suspicious, security-conscious age was to call the police to investigate it. The police, in turn, called the BOMB squad.

The bomb squad tried to x-ray the box, but they only saw shadowy images on the monitor. No one wanted to risk MOVING the box – what if there really WERE a bomb inside? There seemed to be no other choice: they put sandbags all around the box, along with some explosives. With the flip of a switch, there was a puff of smoke and a deafening boom.

And then as the smoke cleared, bomb squad members and spectators alike saw little scraps of PAPER floating to the ground like feathers in the wind. Somebody picked up one of the pieces a paper and it revealed the awful truth: they had just blown up the Sunday school curriculum. The delivery-truck driver had left the box LABEL-SIDE DOWN early that morning.

Ralph Milton, the editor of the publishing house that PRODUCED the curriculum, had THIS to say about the incident: "The bomb squad did the right thing. I know that curriculum pretty well...and blowing it sky high is the only PROPER way to dispose of it. It is full of SUBVERSIVE ideas like: 'love your enemies;' and 'love is more important than power;' and 'be fair to each other, especially the folks who are at the bottom of the heap;' and 'it's better to give than to receive;' and 'justice shall flow like a river...' Ideas like that SHOULD be blown to smithereens, because if people ever took them SERIOUSLY, they would turn the world UPSIDE DOWN."

Advent is a TIME to DREAM of THAT world, dream of a world turned upside down, dream of what the world COULD be, WILL be, to DREAM.

Listen again to Isaiah's vision: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD."

It's BEAUTIFUL. It's everything the Bible calls "shalom": a COSMIC kind of peace. It's a return to the garden of Eden, an image of what the PERFECT coexistence of all creation might LOOK like.

Another dream is Paul's word to the Romans. "Live in harmony with one another," he says, "with one voice glorify God," he says, and "welcome one another." PEACE is part of this vision.

When John the Baptist cries out, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," he means it HAS COME. The kingdom of God is NOW. When we were baptized with the Holy Spirit, with Isaiah's words, "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of

knowledge and the fear of the LORD,” we were baptized into a DIFFERENT world, the kingdom of GOD. For us who believe, the kingdom is NOW. We are called to LIVE this vision NOW.

And yet, something is not RIGHT. On the one hand, Jesus HAS come. God has acted and we are living AFTER the day of the Lord. Death and sin and every sort of oppression have been dealt their FATAL blow. On the other hand, they seem to be DEALING with their death pretty WELL. We look around us and there’s something TERRIBLY WRONG. Death and sin and every sort of oppression are STILL there, STILL at work. Even on this side of the nativity, God’s promises go ... UNFULFILLED.

And it’s not just the world; there’s something wrong in US TOO. The call to REPENT wouldn’t be NECESSARY if there WEREN’T something wrong. In baptism, we have been declared and MADE saints by God. And yet, we are STILL SINNERS in need of redeeming. In spite of our best INTENTIONS, we DON’T do the good we want, and we DO the very thing we DON’T want to do.

To say the kingdom is near is to say that it’s SO CLOSE to us to that we can SEE its beauty, and FEEL its warmth, and KNOW its presence, and yet its PROMISE HASN’T been fully revealed.

Advent reminds us that we are in the MEANTIME – the TIME when MEAN things STILL happen – the time BETWEEN the RESURRECTION and Christ’s SECOND coming. Christ has ALREADY come, but has YET to come AGAIN. Like DAWN’S FIRST light, the reign of God has BROKEN into our midst, but the SON is STILL approaching.

As Christians, we don’t spend Advent waiting and hoping for December 25<sup>th</sup>, EXPECTANTLY ANTICIPATING CHRISTMAS; we spend it waiting for God to be true to the PROMISE, not only in Christ’s coming in the past, but in Christ’s RETURN in the future. Things are not YET as God has promised they will BE, but because God’s promises are ABSOLUTELY DEPENDABLE, that promise WILL be FULFILLED.

In the MEANTIME, we are called to PREPARE the WAY of the Lord. We prepare for the coming of Christ by turning AWAY from the ways of the WORLD, and RETURNING to the ways of CHRIST.

We prepare for the coming of Christ by LIVING NOW as the baptized citizens of the kingdom of God that we ARE, even in the MIDST of a world that DENIES that kingdom.

We prepare for the coming of Christ by REPENTING – OPENING ourselves to a CHANGED life.

We prepare for the coming of Christ by DREAMING those BEAUTIFUL dreams of Advent, and then TAKING them SERIOUSLY, and LETTING them “turn the world UPSIDE DOWN.”

PREPARE the WAY of the Lord! In the words of Romans: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope.”

Hear that AGAIN, because sometimes we just pass OVER words without REALLY HEARING them. “May the God OF HOPE fill you with all JOY and PEACE in believing, so that YOU may ABOUND in hope.” That’s the dream. That’s what Advent is about. That’s why we’re here. “May you ABOUND in hope.”

May it be MORE than a dream; may it be a REALITY – in YOU. Amen.