

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 1st Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2015

A Conflicted Time of Year

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November 29, 2015

Psalm 25 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 Luke 21:25-36

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. This is a very conflicted time of year with the message of Advent running head on into the commercialization of Christmas.

The season of giving at Christmas and the joy of sharing is a wonderful compliment to Advent but most people long ago lost to the Christmas culture what Advent really means.

As early as August in some cases stores begin to stock Christmas items on their shelves. You find ornaments, decorations, stockings and even artificial trees in supermarkets, drug stores and home supply stores like Lowes and Home Depot.

Then the day after Halloween, All Saints Day November 1, stores go into full Christmas mode with sales and displays of all kinds. The barrage of TV and newspaper ads and catalogs in the mail hit us and our towns start hanging tacky decorations on light poles everywhere.

Huge sales start earlier and earlier every year, both in stores and on-line. Black Friday has now crept into Thanksgiving Day and earlier. The crass commercialism just won't quit.

Advent is about Christ's first coming, the nativity, and his second coming, the Parousia. The merchants have come up with a parousia of a different kind, an annual one which comes earlier and earlier every year. The church has little defense against the business sector.

William H. Peterson¹ wrote, *"For all intents and purposes, then, in what has become the global culture of our societies, the culture of Christmas has effectively eclipsed the season of Advent, precluding and engagement of its primary focus, namely the manifestation of God's reign. So, then, the church needs to reclaim Advent, but 'How?' is the primary question in the face of such a massive challenge."*

In our Psalm of Lament, David again and again talks about his sinfulness and pleads with God to lead him in the right way.

We should reflect on that. I can't say that all of the hoopla about Christmas is sinful but we need to ask God to lead our minds back to the true meaning of Christmas, to the celebration of the birth of our Savior and to the expectation of the true Parousia, the time when he will return again. And before that happens there won't be months of hoopla urging us to be praying and reading our Bibles more attentively. It will just happen and we need to be prepared for it.

As Paul said in our reading from 1 Thessalonians, be thankful to God for the joy that we have in his presence. He will always be with us but Black Friday --- or Thursday --- or Wednesday won't. They are transient. God is not.

With the commercialization of Christmas, we get caught in the trap of shopping and trying to buy the "perfect" gift for everyone on our list. We worry about it. We fret over it. Why? It isn't all that important. Your friends and family will appreciate whatever you give them. Don't worry about it and get into a panic to be first in line at Wal-Mart on Black Friday. In truth whatever you are worrying about buying will still be available for weeks at comparable prices.

We Christians are our own worst enemies when it comes to Christmas overshadowing Advent. *"By the time Advent begins, the pressure, even from practicing Christians, to sing Christmas hymns is overwhelming (carols have already "graced" mall music for weeks). Many congregations simply surrender to the Christmas culture.¹"*

We forget that Advent is more about the second coming than it is about the Nativity.

"Thus by the beginning of December we are well on our way to Bethlehem.

"The problem with this, of course, is that the primary focus of Advent is the full manifestation of the reign of God. This is the exclusive focus of ... Scripture readings from the Sunday after All Saints' Day until the last week of Advent.¹" Only in the last week of Advent do we shift our focus from the second coming to the incarnation of Christ.

Advent is about the second coming, not the first. It sets the context of the entire church year. It calls us to salvation, to deeper understandings and higher expectations.

Our reading from Luke makes that abundantly clear. It speaks of Christ's return even while the earth may seem to be falling to pieces. It reminds us that *"Our worries separate us from God. We cannot prepare the way and proclaim the good news of the*

gospel while ensnared by the woes of the world²” or by stressing over what kind of gifts to buy or what to prepare for Christmas dinner.

In his Bible paraphrase, The Message, Eugene Peterson expresses our reading from Luke this way:

²⁵⁻²⁶ *“It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.*

²⁷⁻²⁸ *“And then—then!—they’ll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!”*

²⁹⁻³³ *He told them a story. “Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter. When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. The same here—when you see these things happen, you know God’s kingdom is about here. Don’t brush this off: I’m not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won’t wear out.*

³⁴⁻³⁶ *“But be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”*

This is what Advent is really about --- meeting Jesus face to face and that is all that matters.

If you are conflicted by this time of year, you are not alone. But ignore the hoopla and the hype. Don’t stress out over things that really don’t matter. Take a deep breath, relax and remember what Advent is all about. It is not about shopping. It is about salvation and Christ’s return.

A little Advent devotional book, “Proclaiming the Good News of God’s Peace”, that I have says it well. *“Jesus’ teaching was plain and simple --- pay attention. Do not be weighed down and preoccupied with addictions and anxieties. don’t set yourself up to be trapped by your own misguided expectations. Okay, it sounds simple, but in the*

face of a daily barrage of media hype and advertising, it is a tough order to stay focused and attend to what is truly important.

“Particularly at this time of year it is all too easy to get caught up in the demands of the holidays. Buy this. Do that. Now more than ever, it is important to listen to the One whose birth [and return] we celebrate, as he said, ‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down.’”

Amen

1. William H. Peterson in Call to Worship, Vol. 46.4, “Advent”, Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.), Louisville, KY, 2013
2. Adam Fischer, “Simple Gifts”, 201 Advent Calendar in Presbyterians Today, Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.), Louisville, KY, 2012
3. “Proclaiming the Good News, Advent Devotions 2006, Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.), Louisville, KY, 2006