



Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2009
The Rev. Charles E. Connelly

Usually I read the Bible passages designated for the following Sunday at the beginning of the week so I can hold them in prayer and give them some thought in preparation for our time of worship together. As you might suspect, I am even more intentional about this when I know I have to prepare a sermon. I will confess to you now that I did not do that this week. I was just too busy. That is one of the problems with this time of year, isn't it? We are all just too busy.

Yesterday I was having breakfast with some friends and I shared this with them. They knew about the readings because they are in a Bible study group together. Erroneously assuming that they had studied the passages, I asked them what they thought about them. Well, it took me roughly three seconds to ascertain that they were going to be of absolutely no help to me at all. Well, I was wrong. My conclusion that they had in fact not studied the Bible was not wrong, but my conclusion that they were going to be of no help to me was.

The conversation wandered into the meaning of Advent and one of the guys remarked that when he was a teenager and an acolyte in the Roman Catholic Church, a Priest asked him if he knew the meaning of Advent. He answered: "Advent is a time when we prepare for the birth of Christ." That sounds like a pretty good answer to me, but the Priest said, "No. It is a time when we prepare for the gift of Christ." This friend, who is now more than a little bit beyond his teenage years, remarked that this message must have made a pretty strong impression on him because he still remembers it.

I was astonished by this story because this was something I had been saying in our school's chapel services during the week: God's greatest gift to humankind is the gift of his son, Jesus Christ. While I was working on this sermon later in the day, it occurred to me that when this sort confluence of events occurs, it might just be the Holy Spirit at work, so there I had it; the topic of my sermon.

One of the reasons we are all just too busy during this time of year is because of gifts, isn't it? They are an important part of our preparation for Christmas. We spend time buying them. We spend time wrapping them. We spend money on them; sometimes too much money. All of this is stressful because when we receive a gift, we feel the need to give a gift in return. We adults are seemingly incapable of accepting a gift as something that is free.

It is often said that the true joy and wonder of Christmas can be seen on the faces of children excitedly opening gifts on Christmas morning, and I think that is true. I think one of the reasons for that is because children know how to accept a gift as something freely given. They have no money. They are not expected to buy gifts. When they do give a gift, it is freely given simply for the delight of giving it.

God's gift of his son is one that is freely given, one that we can never repay. All God asks is that we open our hearts and accept his gift to us. That is what grace is all about; a gift freely given. It is through God's gift of Jesus Christ that we receive the gift of repentance and forgiveness. John the Baptizer tells us that we are to prepare ourselves to receive this gift, and that is what Advent is all about. "[John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

The coupled themes of repentance and forgiveness are seminal in shaping the theology of Luke and Acts, both of which were written by Luke. I think the concept of forgiveness is pretty clear, but just what is repentance? We tend to think of it as a guilt-ridden, sorrowful, chest-beating appeal. That can be part of the process of repentance, but it is far more than that. Repentance is translated from the Greek word *metanoia*, which means, literally, to have a change of mind.

The way we accept this freely given gift is by turning away from having the same minds as everyone around us in this increasingly secular world and turning toward the mind of Christ. We are to have a change of mind. That is what Paul is talking about in his joyful letter to the Church in Philippi. "...this is my prayer," he tells them, "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best."

But there is a catch. This change of mind is not simply cerebral. It is not just a matter of faith and intellect. A change of mind toward the mind of Christ involves an inescapable call to action. Trying to think like Christ does not do a lot of good unless we also try to act like Christ.

This goes to the very heart of Luke's Gospel. Near its conclusion, Luke says, "[Jesus] opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations...' [24:45 ff.] Jesus is telling us that this gift freely given to us by God is so profound that we will want to share it. We cannot keep it to ourselves. This is Good News indeed, and sharing it with others in the name of Jesus Christ is called evangelism.

It goes to the heart of Paul's Letter to the Philippians too. The place of the Gospel – the Good News – in his life and in the life of the world is always Paul's first priority. He is in bondage when he writes this letter, but the Gospel most assuredly is not. Paul's joy-filled perspective is always connected to the advance of the Gospel and he calls on the Philippians to do just that, "...so that in the day of Christ [they] may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." The harvest of righteousness is called evangelism.

So what that Roman Catholic Priest said to my buddy was partly correct. Advent is a time to prepare ourselves to receive the greatest gift of all eternity, but even more than that, it is a time to prepare ourselves to share that greatest of all gifts with others.

Let me share with you a prayer by Henri Nouwen as you contemplate your own preparations for Christmas during this exceptionally demanding and busy time. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over so many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen.

This sermon was preached by the Reverend Charles E. Connelly on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2009, in Saint John's Church, Tampa, Florida.