

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:1-13

December 4, 2016

Second Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

ADVENT'S PRESENT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever gotten one of those worrisome and aggravating virus warnings on your computer? One shows up on your screen and you can't figure out how to make it disappear, except to shut down your computer – which can be a problem, if you haven't saved what you've been working on. Then you have to decide if the warning is legitimate or a hoax. Should you click on the button to clean your computer of the virus? Then you have to worry that if you do click on the warning, your computer might **really** be cleaned out, but not in a good way. Even after you've shut down your computer, rebooted, and tried to recover your documents, you have a nagging doubt – should I have taken the warning seriously? Do I really have a computer virus?

This week I received a warning about The Advent Virus on my computer. Here's what it said:

WARNING . . . WARNING: ADVENT VIRUS

Be on the alert for symptoms of inner HOPE, PEACE, JOY, AND LOVE. The hearts of a great many have already been exposed to this virus and it is possible that people everywhere could come down with it in epidemic proportions. This could pose a serious threat to what has, up to now, been a fairly stable condition of conflict in the world.

Some signs and symptoms of The Advent Virus:

- A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than on fears based on past experiences.
- An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.
- A loss of interest in judging other people.
- A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.
- A loss of interest in conflict.
- A loss of the ability to worry. (This is a very serious symptom.)
- Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
- Contented feelings of connectedness with others and nature.
- Frequent attacks of smiling.
- An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.
- An increased susceptibility to the love extended by others as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend it.

Please send this warning out to all your friends. This virus can and

has affected many systems. Some systems have been completely cleaned out because of it.

Just the other day, someone asked me if Advent is really important and, if so, what it really means. Yes, Advent is important – especially in a culture which more and more begins celebrating Christmas even before Thanksgiving arrives. On the church calendar, Advent is the beginning of a new church year. As the margin note next to today's Prayer of Confession reminds us, "Advent begins in the dark." As the days get shorter and the darkness surrounds us in December, we light the candles of the Advent wreath, which remind us of God's promises of HOPE, PEACE, JOY, and LOVE. In our impatience to get on with the festivities of Christmas, sometimes we might not appreciate (or even like) the more somber tone of Advent. Why do we have to sing the more contemplative Advent hymns instead of the joyful Christmas carols throughout December?

The season of Advent can be compared to the season of Lent. Each season leads up to a joyous celebration – the birth of our Savior and his resurrection from the dead. Advent and Lent can both be seasons of reflection, repentance, and anticipation.

I've always thought about Advent in terms of the past and the future, and not just as a time to "get ready" for Christmas Day. Advent looks to the past and reminds us of the first Advent or "coming" of Jesus, in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. Advent also looks to God's future and reminds us of the risen Lord's promise, "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon'" to which we reply, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

It's also true that we are living in the in-between time, what has been called the already, but not yet. While we look to the past and remember and celebrate our Savior's birth in Bethlehem, we also look to the future in hope of God's promises coming true and being fulfilled. In the meantime, here we are, living in the in-between time. A question that naturally comes up is, How are we supposed to live in the here and now, between Jesus' first Advent and his second coming?

Perhaps you've heard some variation of this piece of verse: "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift of God, which is why we call it the present." More than ever, after reading and contemplating the apostle Paul's words to the Christians at Rome, I've been thinking about how Advent's present is a very important message for us as God's people.

In his homily on the First Sunday of Advent 2006, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke of Advent's present:

"At the beginning of a new yearly cycle, the liturgy invites the Church to renew her proclamation to all the peoples and sums it up in two words 'God comes' . . . It is not used in the past tense – God has come, nor in the future – God will come, but in the present – 'God comes.' . . . This is a continuous present, that is, an ever-continuous action: it happened, it is happening now, and it will happen again. In whichever moment, 'God comes.' The verb 'to come' appears here as a theological verb. . . since it says something about God's very nature. Proclaiming that 'God comes' is equivalent to

simply announcing God himself, through one of his essential and qualifying features: his being the God-who-comes.

“Advent calls believers to become aware of this truth and to act accordingly. It rings out as a salutary appeal in the days, weeks, and months that repeat: Awaken! Remember that God comes! Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today, now!

“In the first days [of Advent], the accent falls on the expectation of the Lord’s Final Coming. With Christmas approaching, the dominant note instead is on the commemoration of the event at Bethlehem, so that we may recognize it as the ‘fullness of time.’ Between these two ‘manifested’ comings it is possible to identify a third – [intermediate and hidden] – and which occurs in the souls of believers and builds a ‘bridge’ between the first and the last coming.”¹

Paul writes about how that bridge is built in this in-between time, and he gives the theological basis for living this way:

- We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.
- [Theological reason: Christ did not try to please himself.]
- Let us live in harmony with one another, and be of one mind and glorify God with one voice.
- [Theological reason: This is according to Jesus Christ, who lived a life completely devoted to serving and glorifying God.]
- Welcome one another . . .
- [Theological reason: Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.]
- May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our Affirmation of Faith this morning addresses the kind of lives we are to live as people who find ourselves in the “already, but not yet” of God’s promises. “In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth, praying, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’ With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Speaking of heaven and earth, forty-eight years ago this Christmas Eve, astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and William Anders sent a message to Earth after becoming the first humans to travel beyond low Earth orbit, to see the Earth as a whole planet, to see directly the far side of the Moon, and to see Earthrise.

The astronauts read from the opening verses of Genesis 1 about God creating the heavens and the earth. Earlier in December, Commander Borman and a friend had selected a prayer for him to read from space. As they traveled around the Moon, Commander Borman sent the following transmission: “To Rod Rose and the people of St. Christopher’s, actually to people everywhere: Give us, O God, the vision which can see thy love in spite of human failure. Give us the faith to trust thy goodness in spite of

our ignorance and weakness. Give us the knowledge that we may continue to pray with understanding hearts. And show us what each one of us can do to set forward the coming of the day of universal peace. Amen.”

Forty-eight years later, that’s still a fine prayer for this Advent’s present, as we live in this time-between-the-times.

Let us pray: Emmanuel, God with us, as we wait for peace in the midst of war, be with us. As we pray for families to be reunited, be with us. As we pray for enemies to be reconciled, be with us. As we pray for lands to be restored, be with us. As we pray for kindness and community, be with us. Replace the darkness in our hearts with your light and joy. Let your Word set alight the hope the world needs to bring to life your love, justice, and peace. Amen.

NOTES

¹Pope’s Homily at Vespers of First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2006 at www.zenit.org.