

“The Advent of the Ordinary”

II Samuel 7:8 – 16

I Corinthians 1:26 – 31

Text: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing those that are.” . . . I Corinthians 1:27 – 28

Let’s face it, when it comes to our ideas and feelings around this time of year, most of us have seen too many big Hollywood productions TV. Our sentimental thoughts are craftily cultivated by the likes of *“It’s a Wonderful Life”* and the many television extravaganzas that we have a chance to see. They present a pretty one-sided portrayal of a Christmas (or now, Holiday) Season that is geared toward gifts and giving.

It may be too strong to say that they are completely wrong when it comes to the original meaning of Christ’s birth, but even in saying that somehow our thoughts move away from the season’s annual 15% contribution to the country’s GNP and to something far more important.

Yet it is hard for us – so accustomed are we to the spectacular – to realize that most saving ideas start out small. Often the most influential, the world changing events turn out not the noisy affairs that split our ear drums, but rather the embryonic, the almost secretive, barely perceptible things that can eventually turn our world upside down.

The Advent of Christmas is no exception. God’s chosen manner of coming into the world is always low key, almost casual. God shuns the spectacular and prefers the ordinary. And, in the over-all scheme of things, what is more ordinary than the birth of a child?

God has a way of appearing to be less than God really is – appearing as a child born in poverty and obscurity, a young man growing up almost unrecognized, a prisoner refusing to answer the false accusations of a judge, a man entering a city on a donkey. His coming is so common, so ordinary that the masses overlooked Him.

God chooses common people and places as the instruments of God’s work. In the hill country of Judea, two frightened teenagers were awed by the mysterious intervention in their lives. It was a dark and hostile world, a world far different from the serene one portrayed on Christmas cards or seen in crèche scenes or Christmas pageants. Palestine was a land of disease, poverty, economic unrest and foreign occupation. For that time and place, it was an ordinary place.

It was a land controlled by the Roman Empire, two-thirds of whose inhabitants were slaves, able to be sold as property and punished or killed at the discretion of their owner. Magicians and soothsayers abounded, and barbarous struggles between man and beasts were a popular form of entertainment. History tells us that in a month’s time, thousands of lives might be sacrificed in the arenas. It was a world in which the worship of the gods was based on fear and superstition.

It was into such a superstitious and fearful world that Christ was born. The time and place were *not* what you would have expected for the birth of a king. How odd of God to pick that location and those persons.

God is ever full of surprises.

We live in a world in which what matters is power: institutional, military, and political power. A world full of weapon potential almost beyond our imagination, the power of economic boycotts and political alliances that can change almost as fast as the weather in New England. What place is there in it for an wandering rabbi Who laid down his life for others?

The answer to the question comes, directly and forthrightly, from the apostle Paul, reminding us of the true meaning of the advent of the ordinary: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing those that are, . . . (I Corin. 1:27-28)

This reversing of the order of things is nowhere as apparent then at Christmas. Even the coming of a Messiah had been prophesied among the Hebrew people, they did not expect such a lowly person to be the One, the Deliverer. In Luke, the angel Gabriel predicts that, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.”

And from the perspective of Mary, the “unexpected” is even more pronounced. Hearing the announcement of her unexpected pregnancy she asks the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

The Advent of the ordinary. A teen-age couple. Peasants. Gave birth to a baby born in a lowly stable. God has quite a history of choosing the unglamorous and the unpowerful to bring upheaval to the prevailing views of society. And even more than that, God can choose the most unlikely people to do God’s transforming work in the world. Look even at Jesus’ genealogy – the most famous name in that genealogy is King David. The greatest of all Israelite Kings – and yet King David violated four of the Great Commandments:

- he **coveted** Uriah’s wife Bathsheba;
- then **committed adultery** with Bathsheba,
- then **killed** Uriah by sending him into battle unsupported;
- and bore **false witness** to his people.

And even when we get beyond this, David, this most noble of Jesus’ ancestors, did *not* come from royalty. Let’s not forget David’s humble origins – as a sheep herder, and the youngest of his family. And later, When God tells the prophet Nathan to speak to David about building the temple for God, the prophet is to say to David: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel . . . (II Samuel 7:8).

God’s way of choosing the poor and humble, reversing the way we look at things suggest many things for Christians today. A couple of points.

1.) First, God’s advent into the ordinary brings about a reversal of world values. Now, . . . if God shows such a preference for the weak, for the humble, for the poor, shouldn’t that provide us some clue as to how we ought to order our lives? Perhaps Advent gets a short shrift in people’s minds because the Scripture readings can really induce guilt. In the traditional service today the Choir is singing Vivaldi’s “Magnificat”; or perhaps I

should say, Vivaldi's version of Mary's Magnificat. Perhaps you remember some of those words – they are real seat-squirmers – or at least they should be: “He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away.” (Luke 1:51b – 53)

I know it's never comfortable to have these issues preached from the pulpit during the warm emotions of the Christmas Season. And, believe me, it's never easy for this preacher to be confronted by them each and every year as I study the stories of the birth of Christ. Just like you, I like to get “caught-up” in the holiday festivities. I want the best gifts for our children and friends. I enjoy the lifestyle to which I have grown accustomed – as all of us have. So when I come face-to-face with the Christmas story and its prophecies and their potential impact on my life and life-style, I too first groan, than am overcome with guilt at my own selfishness, and the overwhelming consequence of my all too typical American lifestyle.

And, if I am honest with my faith, I am once again confronted with the ultimate question of whether the church can really be Christian if it does not clearly demonstrate as did Christ, it's preference for the poor, the disadvantaged, the outcasts and the oppressed people.

2.) *Secondly, God's advent into the ordinary puts before us the element of the unexpected at Christmas.* Like the reversal of values, this too, has enormous implications for us as followers of the faith. Too often at Christmas “the unexpected” refers to adult's and children's expectations of gifts and other things. The trouble is we “expect” gifts like the Hebrews expected a Royal King to rule over the nations. And Jesus does rule, but not in any way, shape, or form the way the Israelites expected it. So, again, the hard question – “How do we liberate Christmas from the material and tangible and put the spiritual quality of the “unexpected” back into our lives so the meaning of Christmas extends beyond Christmas Day into the whole year? How does the gift of Jesus – the true meaning of Christmas – become our attitude and witness each day of the year?”

John Killenger tells of visiting a little Christmas shop which was packed with Christmas items even though it was in the middle of summer. Listen as he describes it:

“There were exquisite crèche scenes from Italy, Germany and Norway. There were fuzzy-faced elves and jolly old Santa Clauses, sleighs and reindeer of every size and description, bells and trees and music boxes. There were nutcrackers and candles and electric lights, angels and wise men and little drummer boys, stars and snowmen and gingerbread cutouts. The little shop was fairly bursting with Christmas and a loudspeaker broadcast a medley of Yuletide tunes. It was infectious, even in the summertime. And down in the corner of the front door, where no one could miss it, was the neatest touch of all. It was a small sign that said, “Christmas spoken here.”

“Christmas spoken here?” Isn't that an appropriate message for the church and all its people? Not just during December, but throughout the whole year. The Christ-event is God's word of love and redemption spoken to all humanity. “Christmas is spoken” where that love and compassion, that peace and justice continue to bring reconciliation into a broken world.

“The Advent Of the Ordinary.” That's what Christmas is all about. It indicates that we have struggled mightily – and perhaps uncomfortably – with the forces of

commercialization, that we fought with the tug of a wealthy society, and that we have fought with simple sentimentality. We will know that in a country in which money and capital are thought to be the greatest there is, “the Advent into the ordinary” helps us to remember that charity and justice for the oppressed is the greatest gift and the greatest need.

Two thousand years ago God gave the human race a tremendous gift, and we have found it intolerably difficult to receive. A young woman, probably only a year or two older than our middle school girls, gave birth to a baby boy born in a barn. He grew up to be a great soul. He was fully human (the Bible is very clear about that), eating, sleeping, laughing, crying, hungering for justice, getting angry, doubting and finally laying down his life. But people began to see more in Him. Perhaps they began to look at Jesus and say: “Now that is at least what any decent God would look like.”

The Bible says that Jesus reveals God’s nature, but also reveals what we can be. Jesus was God’s supreme gift to humanity – a gift that promised food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, care to the sick, liberation to the oppressed, sight to those with no vision.

Now, there’s no doubt about it, that gift is a little different than Sony Play Station, Wii, a Lexus with a red bow on it, or a trip to Disneyworld. It is the gift of the unexpected – the advent into the ordinary, but it is no less joyful and even more worthy of celebration. At first such a gift may seem disappointing. But the joy and celebration from this gift centers on the happiness we Christians experience in practicing charity and justice throughout the year. Perhaps the whole world would be a better place if at Christmas (and throughout the year) we Christians emphasized to our children God’s advent into the ordinary.

About 18 years ago (where did the years go?) I was in a hurry getting ready for work and trying to get Sarah to her third-grade class on time. Just as we started to pull out of the driveway, Sarah said, “Dad, my class is collecting non-perishable food for the Belmont Food Pantry.” We got out of the car, ran into the house and quickly put together a bag of canned goods and pasta. As Sarah got out of the car to go to school lugging her back pack heavy with school books and a double-bagged grocery bag heavy filled with canned goods she yelled back at me and said, “You know dad, somehow I feel so much better when I do something like this.”

And maybe we all feel just a little bit better, have a deeper sense of meaning, and perhaps a little more integrity whenever we join in prayer asking that God’s “Kingdom come, God’s Will be done, . . . on earth as it is in heaven.”