

**WHY ADVENT MATTERS**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, November 30, 2014**

Happy New Year! According to the Church Calendar the first Sunday in Advent is the first day of the New Year and we begin the new year preparing for the birth of Christ.

Let's begin with a brief history of Advent. The first Advent observances took place in the fourth century AD. Modeled after the already established season of Lent, Advent was meant to be a four to six week period of fasting, meditation and preparation for Christ's birth. Like Lent, the primary color was purple symbolizing both repentance and royalty. Purple also represented suffering, highlighting the connection between Christ the King's nativity and crucifixion.

The word Advent comes from the Latin word coming or arrival, the idea being God comes into the world and lives with us and for us. So Advent over the centuries has been a time to prepare and give thanks for his first coming, celebrate his continuous coming in the present tense, but also anticipating and preparing for Christ's Second Coming when he will establish his eternal Kingdom.

One of the ways we mark Advent's progress is with Advent candles, one candle for each of the four Sundays. You may notice three of the candles are purple and one is pink. The pink candle is lit on the third Sunday, which came to be a day of rejoicing, anticipating the time when the center candle, the Christ candle, will be lit on Christmas Eve, when we contemplate the glorious mystery of God through Christ coming into the world bringing salvation.

Lastly, Advent should also be a time of earnest longing for our deliverance from evil. Our Advent observances would be incomplete if we blot out the suffering in the world brought on by tyranny, injustice and poverty. Allowing yourself to have a growing awareness of the suffering and despair of others, brings you into relationship with them, deepens your relationship with God, and reminds you, through Christ, we are connected to each other in ways we could never imagine.

Having given this brief history and explanation of Advent let's switch gears and talk about the importance of entering into Advent with hearts and minds open to God. And since Advent is a time to grow your relationship with God, maybe we should start with a question.

Ever wonder why you get frustrated and maybe even guilty when you try to grow spiritually? Could it be you try too hard? Since childhood the expectation was you work hard for good grades and excel at everything you do. Sadly, we bring this same notion into our practice of religion. The Apostle Paul identified this as the faith vs. good works dilemma. Since we've been programmed to work hard and excel, then "maybe God

expects me to work even harder for my place in heaven.” But the scriptures teach just the opposite, God loves you, not because you’re good but because God’s good.

That’s the essence of Christianity, but unfortunately we still don’t get it, so we overcompensate by amending Christ’s Gospel, and turning it into something Jesus himself wouldn’t recognize.

All the more reason to understand the Christmas Gospel is all about God reaching down to us since we can’t reach up to him and Advent can help us reverse our preconceived notion that we are expected to work our way to God and instead simply receive the graces and blessings God wants to give us.

Even so, we still think we have to make ourselves worthy by readjusting our attitudes and changing our behaviors, otherwise Christ will never come. That by the way was the Pharisees’ thinking. They worked so hard following the Law of Moses and they worked equally hard trying to get everybody else on board, so when Jesus didn’t join with them, they freaked out, believing the Messiah would never come because Israel still isn’t ready and worthy.

That Pharisees’ good works mentality still haunts us. We convince ourselves we are responsible for making Advent and then Christmas happen even though the good news promises God makes Advent and Christmas happen by coming down and loving you, warts and all.

So God doesn’t expect you to manufacture a new and improved spirituality and you’re not encouraged to hide or deny your real life experiences.

Remember the men and women in the Gospel stories who sought healing and forgiveness? When Jesus came to their neighborhoods looking for them, they didn’t hide their struggles, instead they swallowed their pride, removed their masks and begged for forgiveness and healing. And Jesus, moved by their authenticity always said to them, “Go in peace, your faith has made you well.”

Make no mistake, Jesus wasn’t suggesting their faith was so strong and pure they healed themselves. That’s a terribly wrong interpretation that keeps us stuck in the good works mentality. Jesus was simply pointing out their first instinct to come to him was the beginning of their healing. And where did that instinct come from? God. God places in you the instinct to trust your life to him and trusting your instinct becomes an act of faith. Hence, Jesus pronouncement, “Go in peace, your faith has made you well.”

If you want to hear that still small inner voice say to you, “Go in peace, your faith has made you well,” take that first step into Advent. How?

First, slow down! We live busy lives, we’ve traded the human race for the rat race, all the more reason to slow down and become aware of Christ’s enveloping presence. If you don’t sense his presence, then call out to him, “Come Lord Jesus into

the center of my life; come closer to me, my family, my workplace, my neighborhood. Meet me in my pain and sorrow. Just stay with me, spend time with me and give me a growing awareness my prayers have already been answered.”

Now, I’m about to say something you may think sounds contradictory, but I prefer the word paradoxical. I’ve been saying maybe we get frustrated when growing our spirituality because we work too hard at it. But that doesn’t mean we can relax because God already did the heavy lifting on Good Friday. You can’t be passive. There’s work to do and only you can do it.

I said earlier one of the major themes of Advent is repentance. That word repent simply means to turn around and change direction, moving away from your old, sinful ways and now toward God. But a word of caution. You need to practice patience and learn to wait for God’s timing. But you don’t wait passively, you wait actively.

Active waiting is becoming aware God is present to you in each moment. Paradoxically God is really the one waiting patiently for you and me, like the Prodigal Son in Jesus’ parable, to come to our senses and make our way back home to God.

Finally here are some practical spiritual disciplines to help you along on your Advent journey:

First, make the commitment to be in worship each Sunday in Advent. Make your Sunday morning encounter with God and your faith community the foundation of your Advent preparations.

Second, make personal time each day for God. Read the scriptures, pray, use the Advent Devotional we’re making available to you.

Third, make a sacrifice. Give a generous gift to your favorite charity or mission. Visit the lonely widow down the street. Buy an Alternative Christmas Gift. Volunteer in a soup kitchen. Make time for that troubled kid you know.

All these are good things to do but the most important thing you can do is to make a new and deeper commitment to Jesus. Put Jesus first, let Jesus rule your heart. Deny yourself, pick up the cross and follow him so when Christmas comes your waiting will be rewarded when you stand at the manger and realize God has already come to you through the Christ Child.

Let the journey to Bethlehem begin!