

JESUS: UNDERCOVER BOSS

Luke 21:25-36

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, December 2, 2012

Today being the first Sunday in Advent, maybe we should start by remembering why this holy season, just before Christmas, was important enough to be put on the church calendar some 1,700 years ago.

Every year since Christ's resurrection Easter has been celebrated, with Lent, the 40 day season of preparation for Easter, gradually taking root until it too was officially added to the Church calendar.

Not until the 4th century A.D., in response to heresies claiming either Jesus wasn't human or Jesus wasn't divine did the Church start celebrating the mystery of the incarnation, God becoming flesh to live among us. Since Lent was established to prepare for Easter it was logical for Advent to be established to prepare for Christmas.

The Latin word *adventus* means "coming," so Advent became the season to wait for Christ's first coming, but equally important, also wait for Christ's Second Coming.

One of the earliest Church liturgies proclaimed

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again,

reminding us that we are living "in between" Christ's first and Second Coming. Just as Israel waited 700 years from the time of the first prophesy about the Messiah, 2,000 years later the Church waits for Christ's Second Coming. At that time, all the people of the earth, afraid of what the world's coming to, will suddenly see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and glory.

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

When Christ comes again sitting in the Judgment Seat, he'll reconcile the world to himself. Of course no one knows when and how his Second Coming will unfold, but that hasn't stopped some from creating blueprints and time tables. There's always been a strong vocal segment in the Church claiming they know exactly how, when and where Christ will come again, in their generation. So far these prognosticators have been proven wrong and sometimes even left with egg on their faces.

Curiously, our expectations for the Second Coming are as much off the mark as the Jew's expectations for the Messiah's first coming. Like us, they thought they had God all figured out, creating in their minds the Messiah they wanted, a great statesman

and general who'd restore Jerusalem to her former glory. Instead, they got what they least expected, a child born in a manger who ended up being crucified. Somehow God always confounds our expectations and gives us not what we want, but what we need.

Thinking we should get what we want makes it harder to recognize the Christ we've been given when he does come, standing right in front of us waiting for our response.

The four gospels report the Pharisees and Sadducees, the protectors of the religious establishment, rejected Jesus because he didn't fit their expectations. Convinced these expectations were based on Holy Scripture they said, "Any religious dogma teaching God humiliated himself by accepting crucifixion is blasphemy."

Likewise, over the centuries secular skeptics rejected any claim Christ was fully divine while conceding Christ was fully human, a great teacher and humanitarian deserving admiration and respect, but that's all. They would say, "Any religious dogma claiming God came into the world in human form is bogus."

Refusing to reconsider their preconceived notions both camps, religious and secular become deaf, dumb and blind; deaf to the inner divine voice, blind to God's self-revealing and dumb, unable to speak the truth from above.

Having said that, before branding me for being self-righteous, smug and snarky, I must confess I'm as deaf, dumb and blind as anybody else. Even though I claim to believe and speak for him, some times I've failed to see, hear, and speak on his behalf when I've been given opportunities to love and serve as Christ loved and served.

Certainly no one in his right mind would ever snub Christ if he/she saw him in his glory, but Christ is ignored whenever he shows up as just another one of us.

There are many stories about a king going out to explore his kingdom undercover, as a common man, to see for himself how his royal officials dispense justice, only to experience first hand, their callous abuse of authority. But then, at the right moment, the king reveals his true identity and proceeds to either reward or punish the good and the bad.

A more contemporary variation on the same theme can be found in the new TV reality series, Undercover Boss. Each week presidents or owners of corporations go undercover, assuming the role of a new employee. Altering their appearances and assuming false identities, each CEO spends a week, undercover, working along side or under his employees with eyes wide open. At the end of the week, the big reveal: the boss uncovers his true identity and then either promotes, demotes or fires accordingly as each deserves.

Naturally if the boss showed up and the employees instantly recognized him, they'd all go overboard trying to impress him, but by going undercover the employees'

true character and work ethic are exposed. So, what's the moral of this modern parable, always work hard and play fair because you'll never know when your boss is watching you?

That conclusion would be cynical, manipulative and wrong. God doesn't want you to do good to impress him, but to be good because it's the right and decent way to live.

So how do you get beyond trying to impress God with your charm and good deeds so when the time comes you'll be rewarded for the right reasons? Answer that question and you'll discover the secret of eternal life.

Advent is a time meant to wrestle with this question as you decide whether or not to enter into the mystery of the incarnation, God becoming one of us, so you can see, hear and speak to him on your own level when he comes near, even if he's not expected.

In the parable of The Final Judgment, just as the goats on the king's left were caught off guard and refused to help when the king came to them as a neighbor in need, so the sheep on his right hand were equally surprised when they discovered the hungry, naked, the sick and the prisoner they fed, clothed or visited was the king himself. Their authentic and compassionate response made it clear they served "the least of these" out of compassion. Their inner ethic moved them to help their neighbor with no expectation of reward. Obviously, even though they didn't recognize Jesus, they allowed the Spirit of Christ to live in and through them. You see, whenever we go out into our neighborhoods to continue what Jesus began we fulfill the Great Commandment to love God, each other and ourselves.

I started out this morning talking about the origins and purpose of Advent, to seek intimacy with God through Christ, as you wait and prepare for his coming. Open the scriptures, pray and wait for God's Word, Christ himself, to emerge from your darkness and into his light. But all your prayers will be for nothing if you don't do something meaningful for those needing your help.

It's ironic, but the Four Gospels, church history and your own experience tell you it's the religious people who have the hardest time recognizing Jesus. Don't let yourself fall into the same trap. Ask God to help you open your eyes, ears and mouths, so when the King comes undercover, you'll be ready to embrace and serve him.

May God bless and keep us all as we begin our Advent journey into the mystery of Christ coming into the world God loves.