

Advent and Advertising

Psalm 72:1-7; 18-19 Romans 15:4-13

December 5, 2004

Thursday I noodled around all day trying to come up with a theme for this morning. Doing John the Baptist again with his gloomy warnings of judgment and fire was a non-starter. The orthodox Advent theme of the second-coming of Christ didn't gain any traction. I even read the assigned Biblical texts for the morning, something I almost never do: I was desperate.

Then to top it off my phone started to ring mid-afternoon and drew my attention to helping folks respond to national networks refusing to run the United Church of Christ's bouncer ad. The sermon wasn't happening. Finally, taking a break for dinner, it dawned on me: the ad and advent have something in common, and it's not simply the letters, A-D!

I had thought about the word, "advent," earlier, and after supper I went to my computer's thesaurus. Bingo! Listen to this list of synonyms for Advent: Appearance, Approach, Coming, Emergence, Manifestation, Beginning, Dawn, Inception, Growth, Rise. And then think, as I began to do, about the themes which lie behind and within the hopes about a second coming or calls for repentance. What propels the hopes and dreams of Paul, the Psalmist, or John the Baptist, is the idea that a new age is about to begin. For the Psalmist writing originally about the coronation of a king, all of the hopes are of course forward looking:

May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people...

May he defend the cause of the poor...

May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass....

In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound...

A text from Hebrew scripture: written with hope about a king 6 or 8 hundred years before Jesus; but we can see why later Christian tradition would reach back to borrow such hopeful words to associate with their messiah. Advent: Emergence: Manifestation. Hope for the immediate future. We can resonate with that can't we?

Paul speaks in a similar promising tone in the passage from Romans also assigned to the second Sunday in Advent:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony...

Welcome one another.... just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing...

"The root of Jesse shall come...

in him the Gentiles shall hope."

"The root of Jesse shall come..." advent, beginning, dawn, inception. Inception... inception of what? Righteousness, justice, prosperity, peace, harmony, welcome, joy, hope! You were listening, right?! You heard every one of those words! They are a veritable line-up of the things most wished for in scripture. I can't imagine another list of hopes from the Bible held more ardently than these. What do God and the people of God yearn for? Advent: the beginning of righteousness, the dawn of justice, the growth of harmony, the manifestation of joy, the approach of peace, the emergence of hope, the appearance of welcome. A modest little wish list, (or should I say hope-list) for Christmas, don't you think? What time does Wal-mart open? Check that! We may need to go to Nieman Marcus for a few of these things.

Bear with me now, we've reached a transition! Let's turn the corner from AD-vent to AD-vertising: the UCC bouncer-ad which the networks have refused to show. CBS and NBC, have of course done us a big favor. It was projected that over a four week period 60% of the population would see the ad, but now practically everybody has seen the thing and heard it discussed morning, noon, and night! The UCC is now having its 17 minutes of fame. The ad, (which will run in the coffee hour), has been variously described as "gentle," or "diabolical," depending on point of view. The first adjective was used by PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and the second by the president of the largest seminary in the Southern Baptist Convention. Bouncers, shown in front of a big stone church, are working a velvet rope-line, admitting some, turning others away: "You." "No, not you." Permitted are people who look like us; turned away are the disabled, minorities, same-sex couples.

Conservative Christian critics are taking the ad literally. One asks incredulously "what church is this ad describing? I don't know of any church that prohibits anyone from entering its place of worship." Well yes, true perhaps, but this is a parable. Remember when Jesus talked about a mustard seed, leaven in a loaf, or treasure hidden in a field? Remember when he described a house built on a foundation of sand? He wasn't speaking literally. These were parables. One wonders if this commentator also protested when his mother read the story of the tortoise and the hare. Did he ask "what animal does this describe? I don't know of any animal which talks or conducts foot-races!"

True, no church literally turns people away at a rope-line. But many people have had, and are still having bouncer-like experiences in church. Even here in Brookside. Our ramp for the handicapped is only 8 years old. We've only said we are open and affirming of gays and lesbians for two years. We've had our share of fights and disagreements.

Market research leading to this advertising campaign revealed what we know from personal experience: many people in our society are still hurting from past abrasive encounters within churches. When it comes to the nearly 50% of the unchurched in America, alienation is a key theme. The rope line is a metaphor, a symbol for the way many people feel they have been treated. The United Church of Christ is not perfect. Neither is this local franchise in Brookside. The advertisement however, has struck a raw nerve. It is no secret that the Southern Baptists, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics do not ordain women. The UCC admitted its first woman minister over a hundred years ago. The Church of Latter Day Saints did not invite African-Americans into their council of Bishops until the 80's. (The 19-80's that is!) The UCC founded the first African-American parish in the early 19th century, ordained an African American in the 1850's.

The UCC shared headlines this week with a multi-million dollar settlement arrived at by a Catholic diocese and victims of sexual abuse. It is hard for me to imagine that if priests could marry, have families and if women were included in the ranks, that a horrible disaster of such magnitude would have occurred. At least 30 children in Mendham, and perhaps many more might have been spared a lifetime of torment. Two weeks ago, I participated in Ann Devine's ordination. As a divorced former-catholic, she couldn't even receive communion, let alone think of ordination in the tradition she grew up in. She was thrilled to find a church home where her gifts for ministry could be employed.

This week's news cycle also carried word from Pennsylvania, that a woman pastor has been defrocked by the Methodist Church. This is a woman whose abilities were even praised by the prosecutor at her trial. But as a lesbian she is turned away from presiding at font and table.

Homosexuals can enter Southern Baptist Churches, but as the seminary president said of our advertisement this week, "It is a piece of masterful propaganda but a diabolical misrepresentation of Christianity." Jesus "did not invite persons to stay in sinful lifestyles. As He said to the woman caught in adultery, 'Go and sin no more.'" One can enter those churches, no problem; but one may not find such judgements welcoming. This not however what Bill Johnson ultimately experienced in the UCC in 1972, when as an openly gay man, he was ordained. We affirmed not only his gifts for ministry, but also his full humanity before God and within the church.

The United Church is faced with a dilemma: practices which we have accepted for a long time are still shunned, highly problematic, and threatening to split other traditions. Neither was there or is there, unanimity within the UCC on every one of these questions. But what the bouncers represent is a question: in this advertising is there an advent? The advent of a new movement, a new consciousness, a new age, a new reformation? Is simple justice being done when women and minorities are ordained? There was a manifestation of joy, when with a smile Ann Devine offered the benediction at her ordination. The dawn of welcome which greets openly gay people who come through our doors prompts the dream that more doors of affirmation will open soon.

Upon reflection perhaps it should come as no surprise when television networks steer clear of a controversy started by a 1st century Jewish peasant. To invite into one's circle those who others turn away, is to profoundly challenge what Dominic Crossan has called humanity's "eternal inclination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, and maintain discriminations." Watch television and you'll see: the inclusion which Jesus practiced, and to which many churches aspire, is no more welcome in our day than it was in his. Nevertheless it is still our call to celebrate advent, emergence, approach, beginning, manifestation. It is still our call to maintain hopes and dreams and break down rope-lines, boundaries, and discriminations for the sake of all of humanity. Jesus didn't turn people away, neither should we. Let this new advent - this new era proceed!