

Sermon: “Is It Christmas Yet?”

Advent 1 Cycle B

Text: Isaiah 64:1–9; Mark 13:24–37

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Is it Christmas yet? Well, hopefully it is obvious that it’s not Christmas yet. It’s *not even December yet*, even if this *is* the First Sunday in Advent, and we have less than four weeks to go until Christmas Eve.

But there is another reason it should be obvious that it’s not Christmas yet. If Christmas is a time of joy and feasting, gladness, Gloria in Excelsis, when euphoria is in the very air, then it is not yet Christmas. Not by a long shot.

Blood is still running in the streets of Mumbai. Violence and death have erupted in such unlikely places as Toys R Us and Walmart. Why? What is the matter with our world, and our free and democratic society?

And on this eve of the 20th World AIDS Day, the statistics are still grim. HIV continues to assault millions of human beings, most sadly those who are usually defenseless, such as woman, people of color, and the poor, and those who should know better about its transmission, and be prepared to defend their own bodies and their loved ones against its assault. I preached my fist AIDS funeral sermon more than 25 years ago, and have wept for too many friends.

No, Christmas is not here yet— that season of joy and glad tidings.

If Christmas is a time of fullness —fulfillment—we are in the season now, in Advent, of waiting and longing, instead. Hoping, if not despair. Praying, if not yet rejoicing.

Every year there are end-of-the year layoffs by employers. The year 2008 has been seeing those layoffs *every month of the year*. My own bank is now on the troubled list, and from the time I started jotting notes for this sermon until this week, the federal government had to rescue it from its own bad judgment and poor management. The outlook experts say not to look for a full turnaround for 12-18 months.

That’s a long time to wait for Christmas.

Then there’s the other stuff we face: a war that won’t end—*two* wars that won’t end, even if there is a new President-Elect. Here in California, the passage of Proposition 8 three weeks ago reveals that not only has the lion not laid down with the lamb, but Christians are sorely divided between lions and lambs. . . .

Why is the world so torn? So broken? . . .

Why does life create so many fears and follies that people must long for something else? To ask such questions, I put myself with the poor of the earth, the depressed, the oppressed and beleaguered. I know no one of comes to worship to jump in a tub full of woes with everyone, but if we have even an inkling of the pain and struggles of human life, *we know*. We have shouldered the burdens, and faced the darkness. We have stood with friends in their last days, and with their loved ones in grief. We have seen our nation hurt and humiliated by petty and cruel enemies ~ and in that I include not just terrorists, not just outsiders or thieves or rogues, but also by addictions, by demons, by HIV and AIDS, cancers and catastrophic diseases which take away our strength and our vitality.

This sermon is really in two parts. You and I have joked about sermons having three points. Not today. Just two, and this is the first part. We know the burdens and the struggles of everyday living. What we may not realize is that so much of human struggles and human pains, inhumane violence and death, are grounded in a spiritual malaise, a hopelessness, a lost-ness which enslaves

not only individuals but entire societies. Especially in these past few months as we all have watched the world economy slide down a global “slippery slope,” anyone who lived through or studied the Great Depression in a textbook has got to worry even a little about the comparisons with *now*. This nation was stuck in a national spiritual depression for more than three years before a brave politician would say those famous words, “There is nothing to fear but fear itself.” And I can’t help wondering if Franklin D. Roosevelt weren’t basically “whistling in the dark” when he said that, hoping against hope that his personal optimism, if repeated loudly and often, wouldn’t begin to lift the nation’s spirits.

I pray to God, my friends, that we are *not* on the verge of a second Great Depression, because I am afraid that this country is nowhere near as spiritually prepared to face one as our parents and grandparents were. We have become soft and lazy, complacent and comfortable. We have lived too long believing that riches are our birthright, instead of a gift we have not always deserved and a trust for which we are only stewards.

No, none of us comes to worship in order to deepen our worries or magnify them, so enough said by way of analysis. But if we do not face the world in which we actually live, and feel the weight of its griefs and sorrows, we are totally unprepared to do the one thing which can truly turn this nation around and give hope to the whole earth?

And what is that one thing? To turn to God with our whole hearts. To seek the one who is our strength and hope. To return to the one who made us, and knows us, and loves us, and forgives us, and restores us. The prophet, in today’s First Reading reminds us that we are the clay, God is the potter. And we have no hope and no future if we do not put ourselves back into God’s hands, and let our maker *re-make* us!

In the Gospel Reading, we have a passage from Mark which sounds even more dire than the Great Depression. For some interpreters, it is Jesus’ teaching about the very end of the world. Perhaps it is. Others point out the catastrophe which came upon the people was the collapse of the Jewish state, ancient Israel, the chosen people who had lived in a Promised land, but failed in their covenant with God and their mission to be a blessing to the nations. But the central point of this text seems to say: “Now is the time. Now is the time to pay attention, to stay awake, to be prepared.”

It is not yet Christmas, because we are not prepared for the coming of the Son of Man. We are, four weeks out, not even working on our spiritual selves, but filling our calendars, writing our shopping lists, making travel arrangements, checking our recipe box for all the fun stuff of Christmas. But we have not yet prepared our hearts and our souls, have we?

So now is the time. Now is the time for us to put our very heavy clay souls into the hands of the Potter. Now is the time to pray for a new spirit. Now is the time to allow the Prince of Peace to reign over our society, in our communities, and over our priorities.

Is that too simplistic, to say that? To argue that all we need do is to put our lives into Jesus’ lap, and things will be okay?

Or is it the other way around? Perhaps God has put Jesus into *our lap*, to remind us that God is present in what is weak, defenseless, simple, and even human. And ***God works through*** ordinary ways and manners in a world that was no less violent then, no less torn, no less painful, back then when people hoped for change, when wise men searched the skies, and when Jesus was born in a Bethlehem stable. If God was present then, where is God today?

To be Christ’s disciples today, then, means to know that the gift of Jesus is in our lap, and we are called to an amazing spiritual task, and given a huge spiritual responsibility. He is the hungry; he is the homeless; he is the stranger and the prisoner, as we talked about last week. But

he is also the discouraged, the alienated, the hopeless in our community. He is the unwanted, born to an unprepared and hysterical mother; he is the abandoned infant found in a dumpster. He is the lost, the wanderer, the one who is not sure what she is missing in life, not sure what her hunger is, not sure there is a God out there who loves, let alone sure of where to encounter that God.

These are the children, the babes and infants of our modern world. They represent the Jesus “in our lap.”

And the truth, the awakening, the spiritual “make-over” which is possible with God, is that in serving them, we receive the gift, we find Christ. Is it Christmas yet? It *will be*, when all God’s people learn to cradle the gift we have, in our lap — to cherish people for who they are, defenseless, imperfect, hurt, confused, lost, or addicted. But to hold them, and to take them by the hand, and together to hope for God’s presence in our lives, put fears behind us, and claim the grace we have been promised. It will be Christmas when we receive God’s gift, make it our own in order to give it away. Amen?

