



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 1 (A)

A Real Joy

[RCL] Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Today we enter a transformational, even magical time of year: for this is... the weekend between Black Friday and Cyber Monday, and there are only 26 shopping days left until Christmas! It is time to spread sweetness and light among your loved ones by making all the right purchases. Deck the halls! Contemplate Rudolph! Be overwhelmed by the magic and joy of the season — *at any cost!*

But I'm afraid I have some disappointing news: This year's Christmas party is going to be exactly like the one last year, at the big family dinner, political differences are going to lie tensely below the surface, and the kids will be obsessed with their new toys for a day or two, before they get lost in the back of a closet, never to be seen again. The new bracelet is going to be put in the jewelry box with the others, the new golf clubs are going to work a lot like the old ones did, and December will turn into January. We are promised so much at this time of year, but it's usually a little disappointing.

That being said, it does seem like a profound marketing mistake on the part of the church to refuse to play into all of this. Why doesn't Jingle Bells appear in our Hymnal? Couldn't we get an inflatable Santa for the church lawn? Christmas is really a church thing, so why shouldn't we draw in the holiday crowds by selling a little Christmas magic, too?

Instead, we miss the holiday boat yet again this year, as we begin Advent with this decidedly *unfestive* passage from Romans. This is the season for reveling, for an extra cocktail, for coveting and bragging about our presents, but here comes bah-humbug St. Paul, saying, "Let us live... not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy." *What a grinch!*

And yet, this is not because the Church is so puritanical that it can't sully its hands with the extra eggnog or Cyber Monday deal; it's not because the Church doesn't have a sense of joy that we keep a holy Advent. Instead, we as a Church keep the season of Advent because we are not interested in buying fake joy at 40% off, we *only* care about the real thing.

The world's idea of pleasure is really just getting to a point at which our cravings leave us alone. You can wolf down three helpings of ham and four pieces of pie, but this rarely imparts actual joy — instead, you end up feeling ill — and in the longed-for gift, the joy is, at best, only momentary and fleeting.

St. Paul doesn't tell us that this *isn't* really the season to be jolly, instead, he tells us to, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

For St. Paul, the desires of the flesh are not only sensual desires, but all of the impulsive desires that rule us: the desire for revenge, the desire for wealth, the desire to prove others wrong, the desire to be seen as important by others — make no provision to gratify any of these, says St. Paul, but instead, put on the armor of light, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the desires of the flesh, joy is only a glimpse, a passing moment, if it's experienced at all. The only lasting joy is found in the source of all goodness, all peace, all love — in God. Advent is the season in which we look past Christmas and await the day on which we will meet God face-to-face.

In today's Gospel, we read about the Second Coming of Jesus; the great, awe-inspiring day, when the Son of Man returns. There is a modern "left behind" theology that paints the Second Coming of Christ as the worst thing ever to happen to humanity, but for the Apostles and all of the Mothers and Fathers of the Early Church, the second coming of Christ was seen as the *best thing* ever to happen to the world.

Instead of praying to be raptured away and not have to face Christ's return, the early Church prayed daily "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and one of the oldest Christian prayers that has come down to us is so ancient that it wasn't written in Greek, but in Aramaic, the native language of the Apostles: this prayer is *Maranatha* — Come, O Lord! It is a prayer literally begging Christ to return ASAP!

The end of time is not the terrible destruction of the world, but its restoration, its healing, its perfection. In this life, we catch only fleeting glimpses of the nature of God: in an embrace, in a joyous conversation, in a beautiful object, in a delicious meal — in these, we have intimations of what pure goodness is, what pure love or beauty is.

But at the end of time, God, who is the actual *source* of all joy, all peace, all light, all love, will permeate every fiber of creation. St. John tells us that on that day there will be no light from the sun nor moon, because they will be as nothing compared to the light radiating from the face of Christ, from the throne of the Father, from the presence of the Holy Spirit. The fire of the glory of God will radiate from all things and fill the New Creation.

In one episode of *The Simpsons*, Homer is sitting on the couch, throwing peanuts into his mouth. On his last throw, he misses, the peanut rolls under the couch, and he gets down on his hands and knees to reach

blindly under the sofa. His hand touches something which he grasps and pulls out, and he opens his fist to reveal a hundred-dollar bill. His response is, “A hundred dollars!? But I wanted a peanut!”

Jesus tells us to be ready, to keep watch, so that on the last day, at the return of our Lord, we don’t respond, “A new creation full of pure joy? But I wanted a Rolex! I wanted pie! I wanted pornography! I wanted revenge! I wanted a peanut!” And then turn our backs on the greatest gift ever given: the gift of absolute joy, absolute peace, absolute love, the gift of perfect unity with God.

So how do you go about waking up this Advent? How do you prepare for the end of time? First of all, love God: make your relationship with Him your top priority, putting God above wealth, health, status, safety, and everything else; remember that worshipping God in church, praying, and reading Scripture each day are the most profoundly important things that you can do. And then love your neighbor, love every living icon of God, as you love yourself: overcoming selfishness in giving freely to those in need, overcoming pride through acts of kindness and humility, overcoming sin with love.

Not because God, like Santa, will reward us for being good little boys and girls, but *so that you can detach yourself from these impulses*, so that you can forget the peanut and accept the fullness of God instead. And then, on the final day of the resurrection of the dead, when you awake from death and stand before the great judgment seat of Christ, you won’t be filled with horror, disappointment, and dread — you won’t be filled with materialist peanut longing — but instead will see in Him the fullness of eternal joy.

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