

## Donohue Sermon

Advent II Year C  
December 6, 2009

I have always been suspicious of preachers who begin their sermons with some silly story or gratuitous anecdote from their own lives that probably did not actually happen...at least in the way they tell it, to them... if to anyone, ever. And these stories usually have no connection to the text or theme of the sermon, but seem to function in stead as a kind of "warm up act" for the "audience" ...yuk.

That being said... This week I got a text from my mother that simply must be shared. (And because my *Mom* told me, that means that what I am about to tell you is absolutely true and did happen.) My mother was working on her laptop next to my five year old niece who was coloring a map of the united states--They were both working from home. At one point little Ellie politely interrupted my mother and crayons in hand, asked her, "Amma, is New Hampshire a Blue State or a Red State?"

Just had to share it. Has nothing to do with my sermon.

Advent. Week 2. The leading man of the season has come on to the stage, John the Baptist. John is calling people to repent. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

For the past few weeks we have been talking about Advent as the season of waiting. Last Sunday night the junior high group spent some time mucking about all four of our challenging Advent lections, trying to figure out just who is doing all of this waiting and for what.

We were surprised to see the remote billing that baby Jesus got in what we had thought was essentially the ramp up to his birthday. Before too long we realized that there was more to Advent than a star in the East. Digging into those texts, we discovered together that the waiting of Advent is universal. It is the longing of Israel to be rescued, it is our longing for a day of peace and ultimately it is the groaning of the whole creation for wholeness and restored relationship with God.

As a group, we Americans are not very good waiters. in fact our retail giants bank of the faithful erosion of our capacity to wait. This week, thankfully, the focus of our texts shifts from waiting toward getting ready.

Enter John the Baptist stage right, shouting "Prepare the way, here he comes!" Now we may not be good at waiting, but we are *very good* at getting ready. Think about it. We turn down a dinner invitation: "I am sorry, the 12th will not work. We are going away that next week and we have to get ready." On prom day, school let's out at noon, so everyone can go and get ready. And then there is the bizillion dollar bridal industry, exclusively devoted to people getting ready for a 30 minute ceremony. Perhaps you have even been fortunate enough to see the program "Say Yes to the Dress," on which women buy dresses from Herrod's and cry for joy when they are able to get the dress of their dreams for only \$7,00. We get ready to perform and to compete. We practice day and night for the play, and the game, and the concert, and the spelling bee. We clean

the house when the in-laws are coming. And *do we ever know how to get ready for Christmas!*

For most of us getting ready can be as gratifying as waiting is disquieting. And the question looms. Why? Why such polar responses to things which seem so similar?

In the first place, there is a fundamental difference in agency. We wait for others, we get *ourselves* ready--or so we see it. Advent then, we interpret as a time to get ready for God. To get righteous.

Righteousness, like sin, is a word that has fallen out of fashion. Self-righteousness we readily condemn in others, but God help the fool who claims to be righteous. I believe that our unwillingness to claim a state of righteousness for ourselves stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be righteous as a Christian.

Many Christians are extremely self-critical, a trait which they criticize in themselves. These are the folks who's bumpers bear the sticker: "Jesus is coming back, look busy." I suspect that during Advent, a bit of this sentiment adheres to all of us. John the Baptist says that Jesus is coming, so "get ready." We know what to do when someone is coming over---we clean! And so we confidently transfer this strategy to our preparations for the coming of God. We pull out our moral mirrors and and start spraying. I see some greed there, some resentment, maybe we'll make up with Joe, it *has* been 10 years. And let's try to muffle that jealousy before he gets here, or at least hide it in the closet. It is Advent and we need to get righteous.

While familiar, this way of living our faith is not at all the righteousness we hear about in today's texts. To the church in Philippi, Paul says this: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." He is confident, he says of God's cleansing work in their lives.

"Because you hold me in your hearts." That's his evidence. And he prays for their love to overflow more and more, so that on the day of Christ they "may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes *through Jesus Christ* for the glory and praise of God."

How does Paul know that the Philipians are righteous? ...their love. Not their list. Not their feats or daring moral do. Love, which is the fruit of belonging to Christ, fruit which emanates from the presence of God in us. And that's it.

This is very difficult for us to absorb. We like to measure, and strive and achieve. *I must be good to get presents, we learn as children. I must be righteous to get God's favor, we carry into our adult spiritual lives.* And I am not righteous, far from it, so I will keep working...HARD. A colleague of mine is fond of saying, "Once you get the knack of it, feeling worthless or of no account is easier than being a joint heir with Jesus Christ." Grace is so foreign it can actually be painful. Most of us beat ourselves up continuously, for years, for generations, for insufficient funds in our righteousness coffers. And these are hard habits to break.

Most if not all of us will expend some energy getting ready for Christmas this year, even if simply to dress for dinner. Thus, I am assigning more homework, to be completed during the holidays! (what can I say, I work with kids.) When untangling lights or ribbons or ornament hooks, I invite us to take a moment to work at untangling some of the ways we may have mis-understood Christian righteousness... to try to allow the truths of Advent to unravel the mess, if even a little. Try. Remind yourself that you are free, that the chains have been unlatched. Dare to take in the fact, if even for just a moment, that you are already complete, whole, Holy and desperately loved.

In addition to mindful holiday de-tangling, there is another set of traditional holiday liturgies that may help ground us in Gods love amidst the hustle and bustle. At a meal or festive gathering you or someone else will inevitably ask, "Do you need me to do anything? Is there anything I can do?" Often the reply is some variation of "nope, you just relax," or "just be." When you hear or even say those words, your assignment is to take a moment. Take it in. And transfer it to your relationship with God. *There is nothing you need me to do. Nothing, just be.*

"What should I bring?" "Nothing. Just yourself." Take a moment. Take it in. *Just you. You are more than enough. You are beautiful. You are righteous. You are a child of God.*

In my opinion, this is the work of preparing the way for the Lord. Stepping back and reminding ourselves of who we are and who is the author of our righteousness. There is nothing we can do. And that is a good thing. The true righteousness of Advent flows from this assured precious place and looks like love.