

Matthew 11:28-30
John 5:39-40; 7:37-49
Luke 2:8-16

HOW WE COME

Let us go gently into Advent this year. Along the way, perhaps, we can re-ask what it is all about. Why does Jesus come? How does Jesus save? Do we believe it? How do we speak of such things with one another? But for now, let us go gently. How do we come to Advent?

I hope you enjoyed the Scripture readings. A strange juxtaposition of passages, I grant you. And yet they do tell the story. Jesus says, “*Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens.*” I certainly do not think of myself as weary, at least not all the time. But I know the meaning of the phrase. It has happened; it will happen again. As for heavy burdens, most of the people I know are carrying heavy burdens. That is not to say that they don’t carry them well. I do not pretend to know which burdens are to be carried and which are not, or even who should be carrying them. But life does seem to come with heavy burdens. What I hear most is Jesus’ invitation: “*Come to me.*” That interests me. Considering where I have been, what I have seen, and what I know, that interests me. Advent interests me. It does not interest everybody, but it interests me.

It is a remarkable thing that the Son of God should come to us. And it is even more remarkable that, upon coming, He would extend to us an invitation. That is the essence of Christmas. Advent is preparation time. We try to get ready to receive Jesus and His invitation. Advent before Event. That is to say, if we are aware of Advent at all, we are aware that someone has come to invite us. To be invited *means* you are in one place, and somebody invites you to another place. To invite is to call – a promise of welcome; a request for us to participate in something, to come to a place where we are not. Who is this who comes to invite us, and what is He inviting us to? Well, the answers to those questions encompass the whole story. I do not see how we can go gently into Advent if we try to deal with *everything* head-on. For the moment, let us leave it in the early morning light, not in the blaze of high noon. Jesus says, “*Come unto me.*” The reason for Advent is that someone has come to us, and He has invited us to come with Him and to follow Him.

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The second passage says, “You refuse to come to me.” “*You study the scriptures diligently, supposing that in having them you have eternal life; their testimony points to me, yet you refuse to come to me to receive that life.*” That’s the story of religion in one sentence! We keep putting things between us and a direct relationship with Jesus – even things like religious ritual, church organizations, and the Bible; even sometimes the way we pray; even the way we celebrate Christmas. We are going to find “life” by the way we decorate, the way we give presents, the parties we plan?

We are not talking about people who do not like Jesus. Those of us who do will still do almost anything except accept His invitation. We have cathedrals, vast organizations, huge budgets, dedicated efforts, and enormous generosity going on all over the globe. But what about *walking* with Him? What about New Life in Christ Jesus? What about humbly following Him in our everyday life? What about accepting His invitation?

Nevertheless, that is also the reality of Advent: our refusal to come; the refusal to accept the invitation. Otherwise it would all be over. The story would be told and the world would be transformed into its true purpose and glory. There would be no drama left around Christmas or Easter or the whole plot of life on earth, with its alienation, incompleteness, travail, and heartbreak. But the Kingdom has not yet come on earth, and therefore Advent is still relevant, still activated, still in process. And the outcome, at least for each of us in this moment, is still uncertain. One comes who invites us. Some accept the invitation, and some reject it. Even that is a little puerile, isn’t it? Most everyone here *has* accepted the invitation, in one way or another. So why does the drama go on? Why isn’t everything already settled, at least for us?

To be sure, some people *have* rejected the invitation, and the One who brings it – rejected it outright. They want nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus. It’s a free universe, at least on this level. We do have free will. We do not have to accept invitations if we don’t want to. But that’s not our problem, at least not in any such starkness. We like Jesus. We even tend to believe in Him. We *want* to accept His invitation. Yet what we keep discovering is that right in the midst of accepting the invitation, we also reject it. Right in the middle of coming to Him, we also turn away – turn back to our own way – frightened by His goodness, and the light it sheds on how we go at life. We start looking for loopholes, excuses, and reasons for keeping some of our old feelings and attitudes and approaches.

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We don't merely "have" our fear, anger, resentment, doubt, self-pity, and determination to win over others, we nurse them. If they start to go away, we run after them and grab them back. We think that without such things, we wouldn't survive here for very long. After all, He didn't. So we gather it all back to our bosoms and hang on tight to the way we are. At least I do! That is exactly why Advent interests me. It may not interest others, but it interests me. Advent before Event. Preparation – get ready to receive a New Life. At least that part is certain: we do *receive* an invitation to a New Life. The rest is uncertain, but that part is certain.

How tired do you have to be before you are weary? How heavy does a load have to get before it is a burden? Most of us do not like to be whiners, do we? We do not admire quitters. I am not talking about the whole world; that's too big for me. But most of the people around here who miss Advent and reject the invitation do so because they are brave, courageous, and of good heart. That is, they still want to believe in this world and they see a lot of goodness in people, and they think that if they can just keep it all spinning long enough, maybe it will come 'round right. It does seem to be on the verge of being wonderful at times, don't you think? Just one more push, one more effort – especially if we would all push together – and things would click into place. And there could be justice, peace, prosperity, and love for everybody. A war to end all wars. Just one more push and I will have my degree. Just two more months of all-out effort, and the company will be on its feet and I can start thinking about family and friends. We don't need Advent; we don't need Jesus. We just need to try harder – try together. We need to all put our shoulders to the harness for a better world.

Watch out for the false Advent and the false Christmas. I am not telling you to have nothing to do with them – you live here. But in this church, in your own family, keep it really clear what you believe and where your hope lies. The truth is that the Grinch was trying to steal the false Christmas and he ended up getting converted to the cultural lies. Most Christmas "celebrations" today are still reversing the meaning of Advent and Christmas. They pretend that everything is just fine here, at least just under the surface. And that the only problem is with people like the Grinch who won't get with the "do-gooder program" – who won't cooperate with the "We are all wonderful" campaign: Life is really beautiful, we all love each other, and everybody is generous and wonderful. All we have to do is realize it and let the good come out, and everything will be fine. In other words, we do not really need Jesus,

or the real Christmas, or a true transformation or conversion. If we just brush away some of the surface greed and sin, everything will be beautiful. Even Scrooge and the Grinch can get with the program if they just dig beneath the crust and shields of their emotional pain and let their natural compassion and goodness shine through. They do not need Jesus; they just need to let themselves be kind and loving again. They do not need God's love; they just need to reawaken their own caring. Never mind God's gift – we just need to give and receive gifts from each other.

I know that many of you, and many thousands of Christians everywhere, are offended by such cheap-shot substitutions for the Christian Gospel. Sometimes we even wonder if we should simply reject all Christmas celebration as false, rather than constantly trying to salvage some truth out of this sea of humanistic slush. We know a wolf can wear sheep's clothing – that while Christmas celebrations use a lot of nice words, they are often not really about Jesus. In fact, they encourage human greed and pride. They also encourage waste, debt, and a shallow pretense of love. But Christians have worked hard for many generations to transform the ancient pagan festivals. It seems a shame to let it all go now. Besides, there can be great joy and benefit in the gatherings of families and friends. And there have been huge improvements in the celebration of Christmas in the last 175 years. Humanism is not Christianity, but it is a long way from the bottom rung. New York City's first professional police force was organized in 1828 in response to Christmas-celebration riots. Christmas celebration was not about family or children or friends back then. It was about drunken revelry and hoodlums demanding food and goods under threat of gang violence. The notion of giving gifts was a conscious effort to change the focus from demand for self, to thoughtfulness toward others. I may want you a lot more conscious of the real Christmas than the society around you today, but in all fairness, it's a lot better than it was back then. Many folk in our generation are trying to get Christ back into Christmas, not realizing that, in reality, He has never truly been there. In the early 1800s, people like Washington Irving and Clement Clarke Moore (*A Visit From St. Nicholas*) were struggling just to get a little order and decency into Christmas – trying to get it off the streets and into the homes.

There is more than one dimension to life. We can be grateful for civil order and economic prosperity without mistaking it for the essence of Christianity. So how do we come to Advent? I don't know if we can keep

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it gentle, but we come weary and heavy-laden – we come broken-hearted – or we do not come at all. I don't mean we are nonfunctional. I don't mean we have stopped working or hoping. I don't mean that we walk around miserable or downcast all the time. I simply mean we have stopped pretending that we are just fine or that our world is just fine. If we do not find and follow a Savior, there is no hope for us. And since we cannot find Him, He has to come to us. And we want to be ready so that we will *continually* recognize and follow Him. The operative word is *continually*.

Lots of people do not like that. They want to find Jesus once and for all. “Only One Way – Only One Christmas.” Only one dimension, and it is always over. They want to be converted once and be done with it. Well, a lot of people are converted once and then they *are* done with it. They never take another step or think a new faithful thought ever after. You could take a snapshot right when they give their lives to Christ, and that would be the end of it. They never learn anything new or do anything different ever after. And if you talk to them once, you need never talk to them again, because it would be the same old thing, in the same old words, repeated over and over. Though it's not what they mean to say, what we often hear is: “Life sucks, and God is really boring.”

Life apart from God – life without the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit – really does suck. But God is never boring. You don't think it's boring when you are creative, do you? What about the Creator? And never put that in the past tense. The Living God is always present, and always creating. Therefore, Christmas is never over. Advent is never finished. Preparation means being *continually* alert to recognize and follow Him. Every day is new. Every day *following* will be a new experience. Yesterday's prayers are never enough for today. Yesterday's faithfulness is never adequate for today. Conversion is a doorway, not a destination. God is *not* the same yesterday, today, and forever – except in love and purpose. We are the ones who are afraid to grow and change. We are the ones who think “perfect” means stagnant, finished. We are the ones stuck in ruts and habits we think will protect us from danger and destruction. Lots of people believe that this world is exciting, that sin is fun, and that God is trying to lock us away somewhere so we won't hurt ourselves or others. Where do we get that? From watching Jesus, or Peter, or Paul, or Mary Magdalene, or any known follower for the last two thousand years? Jesus is the One inviting us into Life. We are the sticks-in-the-mud!

So why am I weary, or heavy-laden? My body isn't tired; if it were, it could recuperate just fine if I sat down for a little while. My brain cannot be tired; I don't use it enough. It is my soul that is tired. My inner being wearies of this broken world. Do I simply mean that I don't like pain and trouble? Well, I don't like them, but sometimes they are just a challenge. Am I simply talking about being a wimp? No, it's bigger than that. You read the newspapers – you know what I mean, but some of you don't add it up. A couple of hints:

I do not like cancer. Some among us struggle with it. More of us will before we are through. To me it is more than disease; it is a form of evil – cells turning against their host, working against their reason for being, becoming alienated from their true purpose. Sounds theological to me. Why are some of us more susceptible to cancer? We don't know. Why are some of us more susceptible to alcoholism, gambling, greed, or jealousy? We don't know. Our fast answer is that we are bad, but that is not true. A high percentage of those I have known who fought cancer have been beautiful, even saintly, souls. And many have won. But what really bothers me is this: The people most qualified – the people trying hardest to be helpful – brutally treat those with cancer. Chemotherapy and radiation are things no sane person would do to a healthy human being. It would put a healthy person in severe jeopardy. Yet it is the best we know to do for cancer. I live in a world where some of the most caring, highly trained, deeply dedicated friends I have ever had are doing severe damage in order to try to counteract an even more severe damage.

What does it take to pull the mask away? So many of our responses are like that. Have you ever had an innocent friend interrogated by the police? Have you ever had a friend who was a police interrogator? The system is trying to respond to evil – trying to stop damage. It is brutal. It is dehumanizing. We don't mind so much, perhaps, if it happens to the guilty, but this is what we do to try to figure out *who* is guilty. Like chemotherapy, we hope it reaches the renegade cells and that somehow the healthy ones will recover when it is over. We kill to prevent killing, lie to trap liars, scheme to outwit schemers – all while the world is full of beautiful, generous, sacrificial efforts to help others. Most of the time, for one reason or another, such efforts are a waste, or they actually make matters worse, leaving the very people we wanted to help weaker, more dependent, more bitter. And while this all happens on the individual level, it also happens in families, organizations, corporations, nations. Have

you ever heard somebody say, “After all the United States has done to help other countries, why aren’t we better loved throughout the world?”

What does it take to pull the mask away? We live in a broken, alienated world, far away from the presence and will of God. Don’t you know that those who do good will be hated, envied, rejected by many? Have you noticed that something in every society and organization is always trying to bring good people down? Martin Luther King, Jr., was a dead man long before they got him. So was Gandhi. So was Anwar Sadat. We all knew it was inevitable that they would be killed, and said so. And was there any way to stop it? Have we not heard of Adam and Eve? Do we not know the story of Jesus? No matter what’s going on at the surface of life in some nice moment, the soul is weary, heavy-laden, broken-hearted – unless somehow it can truly and deeply connect ... reconnect ... continually connect ... with God. There are many ways to sleep in this world, but if I am not asleep, my soul gets weary and heavy-laden here. My soul does not like it here.

Some are not interested in Advent. But I am very interested in Advent. One comes who, though crucified here, invites us to live in a different way for a different reality. “*Come unto me,*” He says. And if I am weary enough and burdened enough, I may just decide to listen.

Is this “going gently” into Advent? Oh yes! These few words are very mild – very gentle in the face of our reality. We have to have some honesty about the conditions and circumstances and issues of Advent. We cannot make the journey without noticing the darkness into which this Light comes.

It is the essence of Advent that the invitation is always open and ever new. “*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’*” So we get ready again for an Advent journey. One comes to invite us. The choice to come is endlessly offered, and it is always alive with new possibilities and new dimensions. Jesus is able and willing to get us into the Kingdom – able and willing to straighten out whatever is wrong between us and God. But never against our will. Invitations must be received and accepted. So we head gently into Advent.