



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you tonight as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

As many of you know, while we were doing our major renovation of our program space, we lived for about two years at Temple Beth El, which is a synagogue right down the street from us on Telegraph Road. And that community welcomed us and provided for us, and gave us space, and charged us a below-market rent. We are so grateful for them. They were so beautiful.

And one day around this time, I think it was the first year, the rabbi made his way up to my office and he said, I have a question. I said, yeah, sure. What is it? He said, what is Advent? I said, well, it's a good question. Many people think it is a kind of preparation before Christmas in which we are reminded of that strange and beautiful surprise of God coming to us as a human being in Christ, of God incarnate, man divine, Jesus Christ.

But Advent is more than a preparation for Christmas. Advent is a kind of faith statement about the nature of the world. Advent says that God will have to come again in glory, and that we do not have the resources by ourselves to handle this world that we are part of. We are lost. We are broken. We will need to be redeemed all over again. And that the end of history is not going to be a *télos*, a fulfillment of operations already in place, but an *adventum*, a coming again of Christ in His glory. So Advent is not just about the first coming of Christ, it's also about the second coming of Christ. The Christ we all crave, the Christ we all need, the Christ we are waiting for.

And he said, are you one of those Christians? And I said, yes, I am. Because even though I lean into interfaith dialogue and engagement, and even though I believe one of the greatest things we can do as Christians is to heal our relationship with Judaism, and even though I know that there has been some harm done by people who use the Orthodox Christian faith in a way that becomes a hammer to some people and destroys them and breaks them, I am one of those Christians. I stake my life on the resurrection of Christ. I believe that when Jesus rose from the dead, He rose physically as a person, like someone getting up from a deep sleep. Because I believe God has the power to redeem everything. And the incarnation of Jesus is just the first part of the heartbeat of salvation. It's the systole to the diastole. It is the moment in which God assumes everything in human nature so that it is redeemed through the resurrection.

Yes, this is a surprise and yes, this is critical. I stake my life on it, and every time I am with someone who is passing away, I cling to that faith with all my might as I was this Friday looking at someone in their eyes as I prayed the prayer that God would receive them as a sheep of God's own fold, as a lamb of God's own flock, as a sinner of God's own redeeming. Advent makes that kind of claim upon us. It tells us to see this world not as

something that will somehow write itself. But as something that needs a coming of Christ, again, a change, a rebirth, a transformation. And I want to suggest to you if this is something that seems a little too far for you to believe in, that you should try it on for this season and see the truth that radiates from it.

A few years ago, we were hosting about 150 public school children as part of an interfaith exercise. We were representing the Christians and the children came and said a question to me, what is Advent? And I told them exactly what I just told you today. I said, this world is not getting better. This world is frustrating and heartbreaking for a reason. It's because we need God and God has to come. And we believe God will come again in glory, much as God came in humility through Christ.

And there was this quiet that passed over all 150 of them because they realized that they had finally been told something that was religiously true because everybody else in their world, telling them about learning to wear a seatbelt or learning to get under a desk, or learning to run from an active shooter, with all that they face as children, with all the things that we've put on our children, with all the ways they are assaulted through the internet and through social media, someone had finally told them the truth and they were grateful because they knew that this world was screwed up. And there was no hiding them from that fact, and they could maybe venture to believe in this God who promises to come.

Now, I am one of those Christians who represents, more or less, the Orthodox faith. The faith that you find in the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed, I read it in its plain sense. When it says that Christ will come again to judge the living in the dead, I believe it. When it says that God created all things and sent Christ to redeem us and to forgive us our sins, I believe it. But I also believe that that truth is so precious, that one of the ways that I worship it is by surrendering everything before it and testing everything that might stand in the way of it, and everything that would misinterpret it. And yes, that has caused me to think differently about a lot of things. Thanks be to God. But I hold to that orthodox faith.

The one thing where I might have a minority opinion is the nature of the glory that Jesus will have when he comes again. Because of course, if you look at Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, when God comes back, He looks like He's been to the gym. He's really powerful. Jesus looks utterly fit, ready to maybe box a few ears and beat someone down if they oppose Him. He looks powerful. But I, over the years, have developed a slightly different vision of that glory because I don't think when Jesus became weak and humble in the manger that Jesus was being less than God. I think Jesus was being completely God in that moment. And the power of Jesus and the power of Christianity is a power that can envelop all of that because it is all of who God is, and it is all of who we are.

So I see that glorious return somewhat differently, a little more gently. And in part it's because I also see human beings as much less evolved than we like to think ourselves. The dominant Christian tradition tends to treat human nature as if we were the world's teenagers. If we do anything wrong, it's because we've stolen the keys to the family's suburban and we're driving it around when we shouldn't be. But I actually view our capabilities as human beings as much lower. We are like kindergartners, maybe even

toddlers, who have somehow fallen into dangerous games and need a *pater familias* or a *mater familias* to come back in and lovingly set everything in order.

And over the years, when I imagine the glory of God, it is of a scene that I somehow remember as a child from a TV show I saw of a rural community in which the father on his way home lets go of the reins on the horse because the horse knows the way back to the barn. And the whole family spills out because they're so delighted to see him. And his head is bowed because he is full of love, and there is this gentleness and this order and this love that descends.

When I think of the coming of Christ and the glory of God, I think of those moments where I was put in charge of my young daughters and we tried to do something like make dinner. And things got a little burned and things got a little out of hand, and then Claire would come in and we would suddenly rejoice because the *mater* of the *familias* came home to set everything in place. She would come in and we would show her what we had done and she would set it right and gently love us. I believe the glory of God and the coming of Christ looks like that, even though you may not find it painted in the Sistine Chapel, but you find it printed in the scriptures.

In Revelation chapter 21, it's the second to the last verse, which is a kind of telescope that pulls in all of our readings for tonight, we find the following:

“And then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, see the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away. And the one who is seated on the throne will say, see, I am making all things new. And write this, for these words are trustworthy and true, and it is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega.”

The glory of God comes as a homecoming in which God takes the dangerous tools out of our hands and sets us in order and loves us and redeems us, and brings us home, and makes God's home with us. This Advent, I have a challenge for you. You've seen those advent calendars, which I find fun but completely misleading. And the Rabbi is still confused about exactly what it means. But I want to ask you to take home this bulletin and let this be your Advent calendar. Take a moment, reread the scriptures, and find in those scriptures that incredible canopy of grace that is promised to you through Jesus Christ. Take a moment to see the way that the scripture's promise to bind space and time so that the reconciliation of God through Jesus Christ can enter completely.

And if that is a little too much, take home this poem by a wonderful preacher, Theodore Parker Ferris. I shared this on my Facebook, and it's been shared over 11 times by the most unusual people. And I've been thinking as to why this poem was so important. And it's simply this: that invites us to find ourselves again in the story of God, which is an Advent story.

By way of Bethlehem,
lead us, O Lord, to newness of life.
By the innocence of the Christ child,
renew our simple trust.
By the tenderness of Mary,
deliver us from cruelty and hardness of heart.
By the patience of Joseph,
save us all rash judgment and ill-tempered action.
By the shepherd's watch,
open our eyes to the signs of thy coming.
By the wise men's journey,
keep our searching spirits from fainting.
By the music of the heavenly choir,
put to shame the clamor of the earth.
By the shining of a star,
guide our feet into the way of peace.

Amen.