



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Tart and Sweet the Second Sunday of Advent 12_5_2021

Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

I have a good friend who loves the season of Advent and observes it in very important ways and very beautiful ways. She has no Christmas decorations in her house until December 24th. There's no Christmas music blaring on her stereo speakers. Every night she lights her Advent wreath and she has very important and specific devotions that surround the Advent theme. Namely, that Christ will come again with power and great glory and reign over the world. And there'll be a new heaven and a new earth, and there will be Him as judge. And He's going to separate the wheat from the chaff, and all will be gloriously raised from the dead. These are the great themes of the Advent season and she practices them religiously. She even in her own devotion fasts regularly in December. And she participates regularly in confession.

She, and I are very different. I got my Christmas tree up that weekend after Thanksgiving. I have a very tight rotation on my Spotify right now. I have Bruce Cockburn's Christmas album. I have Sufjan Stevens' Songs for Christmas. I have Vince Guaraldi's A Charlie Brown Christmas, and of course I have the brand new released in 2020 Cranbrook Christmas Jazz. That's right! Our folks did a Christmas album and guess what? We have it on sale right over there for you to take home and put on your – I love the music. I love the lights. I've got the lights blaring and I've got my holiday scented candles going.

And then there's the annual Advent tradition that is really, really important. Every Advent I watch Food Network's Holiday Baking Championship, right? I don't bake. I don't cook. But for reasons unknown to me, I love watching other people bake and cook. And so Holiday Baking Championship, it's like a dozen or so bakers and they all have to make these fantastic treats and then they get eliminated and eventually one gets named Holiday Baking Champion.

And I'm always struck by this because when I think of desserts and sweets, I just think of sugar. Give me something to mitigate the sugar, bring the sugar into me. And they're always talking about things that are very complex, like balance. So there was this one guy who was making a layered cake and he was putting between the layers, a cranberry compote. Cranberry. And I said, well, that's a really odd thing to add to the cake. And he said to us who were watching, he said, well, the cranberry is there because it balances out the sweetness of the cake. So the tartness actually helps make sense of the sweetness. The tartness makes sense of the sweetness.

Now good cooks, like you all, you know that things are not just a single flavor, but that you need to balance out the flavors and have the complexity that actually allows it to enhance each flavor rather than detract from it. And then I thought, oh, okay. This is why God has

John the Baptist come with Jesus Christ. You need tart and you need sweet. John the Baptist, what a character. Right? In other Gospels it says that he wore really weird clothes. He had something made out of like camel's hair that was roughly put together, roughly stitched together. And he had a girdle leather belt around him to hold it all up.

And he went out in the wilderness and I guess he raided some sort of beehive and harvested his own honey. And to add to that, because you've got to balance the sweet with something, he of course added locusts, you know, crunchy. He did this to signify that he had a stoic palate, right? No sumptuous feast for him, but it was enough. It was enough for the people to recognize that there's something different about him. This is a strange man who made his home in the wilderness, who went around telling people to repent, change your ways. And he invited them to have a ritual, to be cleansed by dunking them in the Jordan River. And all of it was to lay the groundwork of what was to come, to make some sense of Jesus Christ.

I received a beautiful Advent devotion booklet from our Bishop, Bishop Bonnie Perry. It's called *Let Every Heart Prepare*. She sent it to, I think, all the clergy for an Advent gift. And it was written by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton who was one of Bishop's mentors. And there was a devotion in there where Barbara talks about waking up late at night and having kind of a troubling spirit. So she goes downstairs into the living room and she lights the logs that are in her fireplace and starts a fire. She apparently has the old fashioned thing, like an actual log. And so she lit it and it was exactly what she needed that night.

There's something about a fire in a fireplace or a fire pit that does something to us, doesn't it? When you finally sit down and you begin to watch it, it kind of lowers your blood pressure, and as the fire crackles and roars, you find yourself becoming more and more still. Barbara appreciated it because of the juxtaposition of the contrast. It was light in the midst of dark. It was warm in the cold. It was the sound of a roaring fire in the still of her room.

And she said, you know what? That's what John the Baptist is like. When everyone was merry, he was declaring repentance. As people walked around in their soft clothing and enjoyed their homes, filled with goodness and good things, he went out into the wilderness. It was because of his "self-imposed distance from normal life" that he, John, was able to prepare the way of the Lord for all of us. We needed John to be a little tart so that we could know the sweetness of God through Jesus.

How do you make sense of the stark contrasts in your life? As Father Bill mentioned in the beginning of this service, the church has received several phone calls and texts and conversations with all of you who have been directly or indirectly affected by the shooting at Oxford High School. And I think you share my sentiment. It is ridiculous to face that one of the safest places that one could exist on the face of the planet, a school filled with children is exactly the opposite. And I know each one of you has a story to tell of how this has deeply affected you. And I have my own little story to tell.

I'm married to a high school teacher. And my only son goes to that same high school. Thursday morning at 1:00 AM, we got a call from Cranbrook Schools and I picked up the

phone. I was fast asleep and didn't know what that was about. And we heard that there were enough threats or concerns on social media, though they were unsubstantiated, out of abundance of caution, Cranberry Schools was closed the following day to keep everyone safe. And I hung up that phone and I laid in bed for half an hour, just trying to get my breath back and trying to fight off those demons of paranoia and fear. And at some point I began to tremble because I realized that if somebody ever walked into my husband's and son's school, I could in one single moment lose my whole entire family.

And I looked up and I sought a voice that was crying out in the wilderness. And I remembered the email that we all received on Tuesday night from Father Bill. In it, he said, "At times such as this, I find it difficult to name the deep sadness and frustration that we are all experiencing tonight. Let me therefore speak to the promises of God." And he quoted the Book of Lamentations, which was a book that was written by our spiritual ancestors when they were going through deep, deep pain and suffering as they had been removed and exiled from their city and they could no longer ever return to their homes.

And in the midst of their own bitterness, they reminded each other of the sweetness of God. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Just like all of you, my utter need for the sweetness of God is always made clear by the tart and bitter moments in my own life. And indeed it is those difficult times in our lives that remind us just how profound it is that God has come to save us. We all long for the light to break through so that we may see the dawn and the end of the fears that keep us up at night. We are all drowning in our fear and we need comfort, solace, and healing in the midst of our pain and our suffering. We all need to know that the magnitude of the world's evil cannot, will not, and is not matched by the work and the salvation of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World.

This week, I was with a group of people and we were all trying to wrap our heads around everything that was going on. There was a beautiful soul who was just so naturally overwhelmed with the times. I mean, kids killing kids, Omicron, and all the other problems that we have. And he asked, what are we going to do? And another beautiful soul in that group offered this: Keep lifting Jesus up, just like John the Baptist did. No matter what was going on, no matter what he was experiencing, John always kept his focus on Christ and lifted Him up and kept Him center in everything.

And that to me is the reason we celebrate and recognize Advent. No matter how you observe it, whether you have silent devotions or you're non-stop Christmas music and parties, whether you're fasting and confessing or feasting, whether you have candles that emphasize a small light in the darkness, or your house is blazing with Christmas lights, know that during this season of Advent, we are reminded of the stark voice that cries out in our wilderness, Jesus is coming. All will be well in the world. All will be made whole, all flesh shall see the salvation of God. This is the good news for us today. Let the tartness of your life make sense of the sweetness of Jesus Christ.

Amen.