

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Psalm 122

As many of you know, for about 15 years, my primary vocation was to be a professor. And one of the most bitter academic fights I was part of did not concern a philosophical movement. It was not a fight between modernists and postmodernists. It was not a fight between realists and deconstructionists. It was rather a fight over Christmas ornaments.

I was teaching at the University of the South, also known as Sewanee. It's a college that is Episcopalian through and through. Anglican, through and through. And within Anglicanism, there is a long tradition of not having any kind of Christmas ornamentation before Christmas. The true Anglican tradition starts its decorating for Christmas on Christmas Eve. Until that time, things are kept green, but they don't blossom.

And that's why, for example, on our altar today, we have these beautiful sprays of greens. Because we want to communicate this idea that we are waiting in anticipation for God to come to us again as powerfully as God came the first time through His son, Jesus. And as a surprise.

But the university where I taught, we had many Anglican faculty, but the administrative staff were mostly women who came from two counties in Tennessee, Grundy County and Franklin County. Most of them had not been to college. They came and served dutifully, many of them for several decades, and they were not Anglican. They were most often Baptist or church of Christ.

One year we had employed a man named Daryl to answer the phones for us. And he had run a florist shop in one of these little towns in Tennessee that went belly up when the economy went in a bad direction. And so Daryl was answering phones and the administrative staff asked Daryl to put in a Christmas tree – to use his talents as a decorator and as a florist to make a Christmas tree.

And Daryl put up about a 15-foot tree and it was entirely splashed in gold. It had enormous ornaments. It had gold bows. If Dolly Parton had somehow been changed into a Christmas tree, she would look just like this Christmas tree. Well, this was not very Anglican. And so the faculty went to the tree lighting armed for bear, and the administrative staff heard about this and they all came too, and there was Daryl looking at the tree with misty eyes.

And somehow, for some reason I walked in just as the tension reached the high point. Perhaps you've been there in some of the gatherings over the past few weeks with your family, you know, where you walk into a fight that people are having and there's just kind of awkward silence and they turn to you.

And I walked in just as one of the faculty members had said, “We need to put this down until Christmas.” And I looked at the administrative staff and in a moment I thought of two

things. I thought about the fact that Daryl probably would not have been welcome in any of their churches, and I thought how beautiful it was that they asked him to do the decoration. And then I thought about Daryl's decoration. It wasn't necessarily my aesthetic, but it was a great work of devotion. It was something he spent a lot of time thinking about and he had pulled upon all of his skills, and he had put up this Christmas tree for Jesus. And I said, "Daryl, I think it's a beautiful Christmas tree."

And at that moment, the senior faculty lost complete confidence in me. It was like – it was not anything I had ever published. It was not any teaching evaluations I had. There was like this cultural break. You could almost hear it like a twig snapping. It was a few of them just turned away and I was not considered Anglican enough for them because I took the side of the staff and I took the side of Daryl.

Now, I raise this for you today because I think there is a deep teaching about advent in all of this, and that is that we often try to create external circumstances and control our environments in such a way that we can honor the practices of advent, of watching and waiting. And particularly in a culture in which Christmas decorations start up at the end of September these days.

I don't know about you. I haven't seen any Thanksgiving decorations. I have not seen one child make one Turkey out of their hand this Thanksgiving season. It's almost as if it didn't exist. Christmas has encroached even on Thanksgiving. And so I understand why there is the impulse to kind of control the environment, to create some space for watching and waiting.

And advent has been traditionally a penitential season. It's been a time in which we discuss four great themes, death, judgment, heaven and hell. But over the years, I've learned something that began to germinate in my soul the moment I saw Daryl's Christmas tree, which is that advent is best honored, not so much in any external circumstances that we can create for ourselves, not so much in controlling our environment as it is in a kind of spiritual transformation within us in which we watch and wait and see, and the world around us, the coming of Christ.

And that world delivers mixed messages, for sure, and confusing images. And there are many things that are Holy, which have been made profane. But advent is the time for us to watch and listen to our wider context and to see the coming of Christ that comes as a surprise, even when we least suspect it, even when it is hidden in plain sight. And advent is honored, I think, not just by speaking about death or judgment or heaven and hell, but also by speaking about life and grace and God's restoration of all things through Christ. And so one way that you and I can honor advent is by looking for life around us, looking for grace around us, looking for the way God is restoring all things around us, often in ways that are hidden in plain sight.

Tonight at our even song, which starts at 5:00 PM, we are going to be singing an Anthem called Christ the Apple tree. It has an uncertain authorship, but most people believe that it was written sometime between 1730 and 1761 by a Calvinist Baptist clergyman named

Richard Hutchins. And Hutchins, when you hear Calvinist Baptist clergyman, you might think that he might be on the side of those who would want to create a controlled environment, but in fact, Christ the Apple Tree is a moment in which he sees in a simple observation of English folklore an incredible message about Christ.

You see, Hutchins was looking at the practice of wassail, which has two parts of it. One that survives a little bit today and one that has fallen away. The first part of wassail was that you would carry around a metal bowl filled with alcohol of some sort, and a group of you would go to people's houses and you'd sing and you'd invite the host to drink out of the wassail bowl.

Now I find that disgusting, but that was what it was. It was an attempt to create community. But then there was another part, and we do this today, when we carol, for example, that's kind of a wassail tradition. The other thing that happened during the wassail season in certain parts of England is that the revelers would go to the apple orchard. And they'd pour a little bit of the alcohol on the roots of the apple tree so that they would get a little warm and be ready to bear much fruit in the spring.

So Hutchins, a Calvinist Baptist clergyman, who it's likely never really touched alcohol, actually saw in that folklore a kind of transformation that comes through Christ. This is what he writes:

The tree of life my soul hath seen
Laden with fruit and always green
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ the apple tree

His beauty doth all things excel
By faith I know but ne'er can tell
The glory which I now can see
'Tis found in Christ the apple tree.

I'm weary with my former toil
Here I will sit and rest a while
Under the shadow I will be
Of Jesus Christ the apple tree.

This fruit does make my soul to thrive
It keeps my dying faith alive Which
makes my soul in haste to be With
Jesus Christ the apple tree.

There's something powerful in that hymn and that poem that he wrote, something that goes with the grain of Daryl's devotion. In it Hutchins takes this commonplace practice around us, around him, and finds in it the seeds of God's transformation in Christ.

And you can do a lot of things during advent. You can honor it by having the advent candles lit. You can honor it by keeping the alters green. You can look face to face in the scriptures and find transformation through them, but if you miss that moment of spiritual transformation and devotion, you will have missed it all. And so often as so many things in life, it is hidden in plain sight.

Where do you find life, which is stronger than death? Where do you find grace, which is stronger than judgment? Where do you find a reconciliation which preaches peace to all those souls, whether we find them in heaven and hell.

The good news of Christmas is that God has come to us as a child so that we might know those things. And the season of advent is a time in which we enter into the foundational mystery of God becoming human through Jesus Christ, and find in it a lens through which to see our lives anew and a way of being born again as well. For just as Christ was born in Mary, so Christ is to be born in you, in miracle of miracles Christ has been.

Having spoken about Daryl's devotion and about Hutchin's poem, which became a famous hymn, I wanted to finish today with three poems I wrote about advent. And that's because having critiqued a little bit other poetic works and other works of art, I didn't think it would be fair unless I entered into the vulnerability of offering my own work of devotion to you.

And instead of looking at things that were hidden in plain sight around us, I was praying through the story of Christ's nativity again and again and again as I was trying to see what I had missed in all of it. The first poem is called *Annunciation*, and it's a kind of moment in which I looked again at the moment in which the Angel Gabriel speaks to Mary. It goes like this:

In Renaissance paintings you are at prayer holding an open book

The folds in your gown are carefully laid suggesting an ordered soul

So prepared you instinctively trust the proclamation

You sing out preparing your body to receive God's word

All this can't be because this image is our sinless self
But the child you carried within your womb came to love our full selves
God incarnate is not a quiet moment of soul elevation
It is a birth chaotically bringing life from death in us
Your grace comes in a moment of beautiful terror

The second poem is a kind of imaginative entry into the kind of conversation that happened between the Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, who was a bit older and wanted to give maybe some advice, and I have to say that obviously I don't know anything about bearing a child, but I listened to others, and this is the moment in which I came up with as I was praying through it. It goes like this:

The life that lives in you lives in me
Each a miracle, creation, and resurrection at once But
the life living in me is not the same life living in you
Just as miraculous as the person each becomes.
Nothing compares to bearing a child in your body
The tiny creature floats inside each move you make
You're never left alone again
But no one is more lonely than a mother
This I have learned, you will find it so

And the final poem is a kind of imaginative entry into the conversation between Mary and the Angel Gabriel, in which I was adding some flesh to what we know in the scriptures. It's called *Messenger*.

It is not for me to judge the news I must deliver
I can only trust the promise hidden is greater than what you could ask or imagine
You will bear the fullness of the word
God already made you able to receive what I speak
Do not be afraid, is poor advice to anyone dismayed or distraught

Trust the promise of God's presence hidden in these words

Trust the grace shining from your body like the sun

For as I made my way through brokenness to find you

I followed the light shining from you as much as the light sending me

May this admin be a time in which you find the light of Christ in one another and in this world and inside yourself. And may you see that light streaming from the Christmas star calling you home. Calling you to new birth, calling you to a new life, a new faith, a new grace, and a new hope. Amen.

[End of Recording]