



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today 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.

From the earliest Christian traditions, it has become the practice at Advent to talk about four last things. These four last things are critical for us to contemplate during Advent, so the tradition of Christianity tells us. And these four last things are death, judgment, Heaven and Hell. And I can't think of more cheery things to think about today than death, judgment, Heaven and Hell. It seems like most of the Christmas season is spent trying to keep those four things at bay. All of the celebrations we do, everything we have, all of the beautiful tinsel that you see in CVS. Everything has been created to keep these things at bay, but they are the realities of life, they're the realities of this world, and we all know them too well.

But the Christian tradition doesn't just speak about these four things. It's not about death, judgment, Heaven and Hell alone. Each of these are linked to other important things that we have to keep in mind. When we think about death, we also think about hope because for Christians, death is not without hope. We hope for resurrection. We see in the midst of death, life – life is changed, not ended. That is the promise of Christianity built within our liturgies when we do funerals.

And judgment is not simply judgment alone. Judgment is not just the sorting of good and evil or sheep into goats because judgment is always balanced with love. The purpose of judgment is to repair relationship. It's not to cast out into darkness. And Heaven is not merely the place we want to all go to, but we're in no hurry to get to. Heaven is the place of joy. Heaven is a reminder to us that you and I have a birthright to joy given by Jesus. Heaven is a reminder to us that in that life that has changed and not ended we'll be reunited with those who have gone before, those who have loved us.

And Hell. Hell, if we believe everything that is revealed about Jesus, Hell is a place which is ultimately empty, and therefore, in the teachings of Christianity, Hell is always balanced with peace. So we have in Advent these four things, but they're always linked. You don't hear about death without hearing about hope. You don't hear about judgment without hearing about love. You don't hear about Heaven without hearing about joy. You don't hear about Hell without hearing about peace.

These are the four things you and I are asked to contemplate in Advent. And traditionally in the second Sunday of Advent, it is the tradition to speak about judgment. Why? Because traditionally, you read from Matthew chapter three where John the Baptist turns to the scribes and Pharisees and says, you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath? And most people experience that as judgment. Perhaps you do. I do. And so judgment is the topic for today, and it's important for us to recognize in judgment that judgment is one of those things that we all do.

Now, I know that many of you are going to beautiful celebrations among your work friends and family friends, and everything you're doing, all of the beautiful gatherings that you have for the holiday time. But I want to ask you a serious question. How many times have you, driving away from one of these gatherings, turned to your beloved and said, he looks awful? What has happened?

Judgment is one of those things that we all fall into. Judgment not only happens at these work gatherings, but also during the holidays. Judgment is always something that we internalize. We always feel like we don't have enough. We always have a tendency to self shame. We always have a tendency to self-sabotage, particularly when we are going through all of that stress of being in public more than we have, all the while, while the days are getting shorter and the weather is getting colder. We have a tendency to judge ourselves and we find that we let others' opinion of us determine how we think about ourselves. When we don't get the bonus we are hoping for at work, when we don't get the affirmation that we were hoping to get when we moved back to our families and presented ourselves as our true selves. If we don't get that love and joy that we think every family has except ours, it's easy for us to fall into self-judgment during the holidays.

And this is because the holidays are hard for all of us. It's one thing I've had to learn over the past 30 years of ministry that if anything's going to go wrong in someone's life, it tends to happen at the holidays. If someone's going to fall off the wagon and get drunk, it's going to happen during the holidays, during all the stress and all the opportunities and all the temptations. If someone's going to fall down, it's going to be at the holidays. If someone's going to fall into the hospital, it's going to be at the holidays. If someone's going to get up and walk out on their marriage of 25 years, it often happens at the holidays. The holidays are hard. That's why our culture tries to create so much opportunity to gather. The holidays are hard. It's difficult times.

So when I speak about judgment, I'm not speaking about something that's far off. I'm not speaking about something that we never do. It's something that is part of what it means to be human. We judge. There's an old saying that's attributed to Mark Twain where he says, reportedly, "There are two types of people in this

world: those who separate this world into two types of people, and those who don't." We all have a tendency to sort this world into two types of people. We all have a tendency to judge. We all have a tendency, better than God, to separate this world into sheep and goats, don't we? And yet it is God who always places judgment into love.

When John speaks to the people in Matthew chapter three, he is not giving them only a word of judgment. He's telling them that it is possible for them to return to God. And the people of God in that time period had felt that their nation had so fallen that they would never be able to return to God, that the gates of Heaven had been shut. And so when John said to them that they could return if they would repent, he was actually uttering this word of repair and reconciliation and grace, all out of love. God wants us to be in right relationship with God. And any judgment that we have in this world, whether created by ourselves in the echo chambers of our mind or in our environment, when people say anything to us, all of that needs to be seen within the larger judgment and love of God because God is not giving up on us.

And that is the good news of Advent. God is willing to walk through into that love and begin again. God is coming, as we read in Isaiah, as a child who will lead us so that the wolf and the lamb will lie down together. And this is our work in Advent. This is what we are to do. We are to see ourselves in the capacity of all the ways we create our own personal Hells through judgment. Because judgment is not just a human thing. It's something that has accelerated in this world.

When you can choose who to listen to on social media, you are falling into that beautiful, sometimes satisfying, wonderful exercise in judgment. There's nothing so satisfying as when someone says to you, this is wrong or that person's wrong. We don't need that kind of thing in our world. It's so satisfying, but the problem is we only find in that echo chamber another self who is us. We don't actually encounter the person who we are meant to be in relationship with. The person who not only differs from us, but who demands our love, as difficult as that might seem. We don't get to see the incredible grace we have when someone who is different from us reaches out in love to us.

Many years ago in the 1930s, Martin Buber published in English, a book called "I and Thou," and it's this incredible, beautiful text that continues to resonate to this day. I was reading it again for the first time this week. Buber says that all of life is about seeing in another, an encounter with God. It's not just that I am seeing you, it's that when I see you, I see God, which means that in every human encounter, God is present, and I can't know myself if I do not know myself in God with you. All of the judgment has to give way to love. This is the work we have to do. And you and I are living through a time in which we no longer have these I-thou moments. In fact, what you and I mostly have because of social media, because of

the technology before us, we have encounters of I-I. And that is its own judgment. That is its own Hell. That is its own prison.

The poem I have for you today is meant to unpack a kind of advent hope and an advent love and an advent joy and an advent peace, but it does it by exercising just a bit of judgment out of love. It's by Adrienne Rich. I have it in your bulletins. You can pull it out if you have it. And the title of it is "In Those Years."

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves
reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I

The problem with this current world in which we find ourselves living is that we have a lot of "I" relations, but not many "you" relations. We have a lot of "I" relations, but not many "we" relations. And Advent is a time to create space so that those relations and that love reign supreme. Rabbi Hillel, the great Jewish philosopher, said this: "If I am only for myself, who am I? What am I? If I am only for myself, who am I? What am I? The only way forward in faith is by seeing our "I" as always conditioned by God and "you" by experiencing in that power an I-thou relationship.

This is the space we create in Advent. This is the holy space that we have to protect like a candle in the wind. This is what we are called to do as a community, but it's also work that we do in our own practice of prayer. This Advent, find your way past the judgment. Find your way to the love of God which is for you, because the "I" that you are becomes an "I" when God becomes your "you."

I close with a prayer of Martin Luther. It's one of my favorites. It's a child's prayer.

Oh, sweet Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled
Within my heart, that it may be

***"Love And Judgement"- The Second Sunday Of Advent 12/7/25
AudioClerk Transcription***

Pure and lovely kept for Thee.

Make space this Advent in your heart for love. Make space this Advent in your heart for hope. Make space this Advent in your heart for joy. Make space this Advent in your heart for peace.

Amen.