

## *Advent*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Malachi 2:8** But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts,<sup>9</sup> and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.<sup>10</sup> Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 20:21** So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Acts 24:11** As you can find out, it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> They did not find me disputing with anyone in the temple or stirring up a crowd either in the synagogues or throughout the city.<sup>13</sup> Neither can they prove to you the charge that they now bring against me.<sup>14</sup> But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets.<sup>15</sup> I have a hope in God-- a hope that they themselves also accept-- that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

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I didn't grow up with Advent. We didn't even really celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday. How many of you grew up celebrating or observing Advent?

It's odd. I like the Advent wreath. It's a pretty symbol. But we seem a little confused about what the symbol means. Are the four weeks and the four outer candles about faith, hope, love, and joy - or, are they to remind us of the shepherds, the wise men, the star of Bethlehem, and the angels in the heavens proclaiming the good news? Why is one candle sometimes pink? There doesn't seem to be any sort of clear consensus about all of this. Is Advent just an unclear and confused period on the church calendar?

On a related topic -

Are you ready for Christmas?

Have you got your shopping done?

How many of you have to ship presents to other places?

We collect boxes and bubble wrap and peanuts all year.

Did you go shopping on Black Friday?

How are the crowds this year? Are you doing any of your shopping online or out of catalogs?

Are your Christmas cards addressed? Do you have holiday baking to do? Are you throwing a holiday party or going to one - or several?

Would you say that your general attitude was one of joy and peace - or is the dominant feeling one of so little time and so much to do? Are the weeks before Christmas filled with anticipation - or just frantic scurrying about? I think most of us are tired, harried, despondent, or joyless - or will be by Christmas Eve.

I think that there are some rough parallels between our situation today and the situation in Palestine about 2000 years ago. The Jews understood themselves to be a chosen people, to be a nation that had a particular relationship with God. There had been a time when they'd occupied the land of Canaan and had made it their own. They'd become a strong nation. They'd been rich and powerful under King David and then King Solomon. They had been through hard times during the Babylonian conquest, but eventually returned home and had actually thrown the Greek occupying forces out a couple of hundred years earlier. But now, the Romans occupied the land. Once again, their pride was trampled on. And now, Roman policies had impoverished them. People who had been land owners were reduced to begging for work as day laborers.

We have thought of ourselves as a special people, blessed by God. We occupied this land and saw our domination of it and the northern part of the western hemisphere as our natural place, our manifest destiny we called it. We celebrate our memory of days of power and prosperity, especially the middle portion of the twentieth century. In the early nineties, we celebrated the fall of the communist empire and stood proudly alone as the sole remaining superpower. But we've learned that we aren't universally liked and admired. We've learned that we are not impregnable - nor has our prosperity, technology, and power guaranteed that our conflicts will be short and decisive. And now we're in a recession - a time when many have lost their jobs, many are making far less than they used to, and even those who seemed secure in their position and their prosperity find themselves insecure and unsure.

Two thousand years ago, some of the Jews were Sadducees, folks who were highly focused on correct worship. If they just worshipped properly, their God would smile on them again and make things right. We see some of that today. If we just worshipped reverently, or if we just worshipped exuberantly, or if we just worshipped every Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night, then we would once again bask in God's pleasure.

Two thousand years ago, some of the Jews were Pharisees, people who were meticulous about obedience to the law. Everything depended on observing the minutia of the law to the ultimate extent. Should they begin observing the Sabbath as the sun first touched the horizon - or wait for full darkness to fall? Did they carefully calculate their tithes exactly? Did they remember to tithe the mint and herbs that grew in the kitchen garden? Today we may fret over whether someone has tattoos, whether they say hell or heck, if they buy lottery tickets, or whether they immerse or sprinkle at baptism.

Two thousand years ago the Essenes went out into the desert, removing themselves from the rest of society, hoping that a pious community could find favor with God. Today, there are those who are only focused on their own personal salvation. They're devout and pious - and they share none of the love of God with others. There are churches that build huge complexes with gyms, theaters, bowling alleys, and coffee bars so that their membership has a pure enclave that is unblemished by the world - and in that isolation the hands and feet of Christ are shackled.

Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes. Correct worship, detailed obedience, and withdrawal from society. In their state of discontent, oppression, and economic distress, those were the ways that the Jews sought to gain favor and closeness to God - and we do similar things today. The Jews hoped for a new Moses who would call down plagues on the Romans. They dreamed of a new Elijah who could summon fire from heaven to destroy the infidels. They prayed for another King David who would pick up the sword and drive the Roman garrisons from the land.

What they got was a baby born into a peasant family under indelicate circumstances. What that baby brought wasn't plagues of frogs or locusts. It wasn't consuming fire from heaven. It wasn't a mighty warrior with a singing sword. The baby brought The Way. The Way. That's what the teachings of Jesus came to be called. Jesus walked in The Way. He called for others to follow him in The Way. Over and over, we're called to the journey of faith, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and we're told that Jesus shines light on the path that we're to follow. The Way isn't what was expected or prayed for. Not then. Unfortunately, often, not now, either. The Way. A way of life - a way of living - a lifelong pilgrimage and journey.

Like the people in Palestine 2000 years ago, we'd welcome the spectacular solution, the quick fix, the divine demonstration of power. **And that is why we need Advent**. Not so we will mindlessly follow some rut of ritual. No, we need Advent to consciously work at shaking off our gradually accumulated assumptions about this season. We need Advent to break away from the tinsel, the distractions, and the corruptions of Christmas. We need to prepare the way of the Lord. We need to prepare our hearts to receive the gift we

have been given. We need to begin looking for the path that God will show us. Like Abraham, we're called to set out on a journey to a place that we will be shown. Where we are going - and what we will become will be clearer as we travel further and further along The Way.

To prepare yourself for the coming of the baby, the child who will grow up to declare The Way, here are some spiritual exercises for you to try during the holidays:

First of all, remember that you are in charge of your schedule. You choose what you will do with your time.

Turn off the TV. That'll turn off the advertisements that try to convince you that somehow having a new leather jacket will make your life meaningful. Put on some Christmas music. I don't mean songs about chestnuts roasting on an open fire or snow covered winter wonderlands. Put on music that sings of the greatest gift the world was given, songs that tell of peace on earth and goodwill toward others.

Gather the newspaper ads and take them directly to the recycle bin without looking at them. Their whole purpose is to make you want. The whole purpose of Christmas is to celebrate a gift.

Pick up one of the Advent devotional booklets on the table out in the narthex. Promise yourself that you will read one page each day. You feed your body three times a day. Resolve to nourish your soul at least once a day.

Perhaps you take your children or grandchildren to see Santa Claus. Put them in your lap and read to them about the birth of Jesus.

As you plan the dinner for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, thinking about golden turkey, cornbread dressing, cranberry sauce, yams, and pecan pie, don't forget to plan to come have dinner with Christ at the communion table on Christmas Eve.

And give some thought to this. How will what you spend on your Christmas feast compare with how much you spend on food to share with others that you put in the red wagon out in the hall?

How will what you spend on Christmas presents for family and friends compare with your gift to Christ? The Magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What will you give? In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - Amen.