

Advent IV (24 Dec. 2023)

+In the Name of...

“REJOICE in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.

Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.”

“I can’t wait, I can’t wait, I can’t wait!” When my son Charles was very young, friends of ours gave him a book about a bear named Sam. I have forgotten the name of the book, but Sam and his mother made Christmas cakes for all their neighbors. In the days leading up to baking day, Sam could hardly contain his excitement in anticipation of the baking and the delivering of the cakes.

I hear older folks lament (and here by “older” I mean anyone over the age of about 20) that they wish the Christmas seasons had the magic that it had when they

were children. Surely, we can all remember those days: that length of time that seemed like eons, but only stretched from Thanksgiving to Christmas. (The Hallmark stores did not put up their ornaments in July in those days. Or maybe I just refused to walk down that aisle!) The shopping, the wrapping, and the going places amidst the crowds that seem like a chore now that we are adults were fun, and just part of the process. While we may never be able, as adults, to replicate the excitement of not knowing what Santa Claus was going to leave us under the tree (I, for one, remember singing “100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall” over and over again in my head after I had gone to bed on Christmas Eve until I eventually passed out due to boredom.), as adults we should be able to convince ourselves intellectually of the excitement of the coming of

the Incarnate God. No other religion teaches that God humbled Himself by becoming a human!

I read an article in *Christianity Today* this week that questions the wisdom of singing traditional Christmas hymns and carols at all in church. The author stated we sing them out of nostalgia, rather than for the theological benefit we get out of them. Now, she was talking about genuine hymns, not *Santa Baby* or *Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer*. In fact she listed the top five hymns sung the first week of December, based on requests for use of copyright licenses: *O Come All Ye Faithful*, *Joy to the World*, *O Come O Come Emmanuel*, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, and *Joy to the World*.

What struck me about this list, and I grant you that it has nothing to do with the author's point, is that only one

of the five is an Advent hymn. Remember: she said these were from the first week of December. And not a kind of fuzzy, maybe it could be end of Advent-beginning of Christmas sort of thing, but “come let us adore him: He has been born; don’t you hear him crying; he starts Hebrew school tomorrow!” (Due to budget cuts, the Magi were not able to afford travel from the Far East this year.)

Fifteen years ago, it seemed that every other work email I received had the tagline at the bottom, “We don’t stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing.” It is not that I particularly dislike it or disagree with its sentiment, but I thought it got over-used. But perhaps we could Christianize and Christmas-ize it: “We didn’t stop enjoying preparing for Christmas because we got tired of Christmas, we got tired of Christmas

because we stopped enjoying preparing for it!” As children we made paper chains to count down the days, made lists of people we needed to make or buy gifts for, lists of Christmas card recipients, (there were lots of paper lists in those days before smartphones!), baking to plan for, wrapping to do, Christmas concerts at school, Secret Santa and school Christmas parties. We *prepared* like nobody’s business!

Without setting out to, we were keeping Advent. We were preparing ourselves for Christmas, awaiting its arrival! It might have been from a totally secular perspective, but it forced us to go through the motions of a preparation. Now, I fear, we view the time of Advent as just a necessary “waiting room” as we mark time so we can get through that other “big event”. Isn’t it over?!

Some of you are thinking that this sermon is a month too late, that it should have been preached at the First Sunday of Advent or maybe even before. You could be right, but maybe the timing could work for your advantage: what sermon did I preach a month ago? Exactly! You don't remember. Don't feel bad; I don't remember either! But perhaps if your Christmas does not go exactly as you had hoped, you might think of this sermon, still fresh in your mind. I do not mean you have a *bad* Christmas, but just that it's missing that "sparkle" of the Christmases of your youth. I want you to take the zeal of your youth and add the maturity of your relationship with Christ. I have heard members of this Parish, but also people outside the Parish, say they are no glad they no longer have little children at home so they do not have to

do all of the preparation for that kind of a Christmas morning. Okay, fair enough. But what are you going to do instead?! What can you do both to prepare yourself for the coming of Our Lord, but what might you be able to do to help someone else prepare, which in turn will drag you along in the process?

This year Advent is the shortest it can possibly be: with the Fourth Sunday of Advent also being Christmas Eve. But in these mere hours, think of what you can do to seriously prepare your hearts for the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ. What might you try next year? “Rejoice!” commands the Prophet. “And again I say rejoice!” Traditional Christians have the reputation (deserved or not) of walking around with dower expressions on our faces. We should have the most reason of ANYONE to

rejoice at this time of year! Let us prepare ourselves for that arrival like we really believe that it is as important as a doctrine of the Church as She states it is. Let us be able to confidently state, “Come, Lord Jesus: we are ready for Thee!”

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