

Advent 2  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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## **True Advent Comfort**

I received a piece of mail the other day from the United States Postal Service. It was in holiday red and addressed to Postal Customer, at our address. Across the front it proclaimed: "Inside: Everything you need to win the holidays."

I was taken aback. I didn't know that I stood the chance of losing the holidays! What would it be to lose the holidays? What is really at stake, and what do I need to do not to lose them? What does it mean to win them? I had no idea it was a competition! I was flummoxed; I didn't know what to think!

Maybe my problem was that the Postal Service, like everyone else in our economy, looks to this season for a disproportionately large portion of their yearly income. This was confirmed when I opened the piece of mail. It was designed as a football playbook, and if you made these plays your packages would get to your loved ones on time, and, of course, the USPS would have more business! Then it hit me. It's not me who stands to lose the holidays. It's them! The USPS does stand to lose because of the way they conceive of the holidays.

The Scripture lessons for today gives a very different perspective. The first lesson from Isaiah captures it well: "Comfort, comfort my people, says our God!" The time of tribulation has gone on long enough. God will act on behalf of God's chosen people. Ah, so we don't have to "win the holidays," God will do it!

The Gospel lesson tells the story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, especially the part played by John. John, cousin to Jesus, is the Baptizer, the one who prepares the way for the coming of the Christ. Ah, so we don't have to "win the holidays," God has already sent the winning team onto the field.

The Epistle lesson reminds us that the delay in the Lord's return is an act of mercy: God is not willing that any should perish. This is the time of grace in which all are called back into relationship with God. God will not cut anyone out who wants to come. And so, the delay is mercy. We don't have to "win the holidays," God is already at work.

Advent, in spite of what the USPS thinks, is not a competition, it is a preparing for what God is already doing. It does not depend on our action for it to happen. Our action, then, does not achieve the holidays, it prepares us to receive what has already been given!

Advent calls for a holy silence, a spreading awareness, and an anticipation of delight! As we walk through this season these two voices are both speaking to us. One says that we must do, do, do.

For some of us it goes like this:

- We must cook,
- We must clean.
- Family is coming and we must be ready.

For some of us it goes like this:

- We must buy,
- We must acquire.
- There are important people who need gifts from us.

For some of us it goes like this:

- I have no one to prepare for,
- And I have no money to spend.
- I am so depressed!

The other voice invites us to sit back and take a look at things. We are already receiving so much! Family may be coming over. There are people for whom we get to express our love in giving gifts. If we are alone we have time for ourselves that so many people do not have. Then there is the glory of the season, the street decorations, the colors and tinsel, the songs and the stories told and retold.

But most of all, (and all of the above has no meaning whatsoever without the central part of it all...) in these days we celebrate the Incarnation. God becomes one of us. God blesses our materiality and our createdness with the divine presence. Because of the Incarnation we as Christians can look around at the created order and say, "Wow, how beautiful, how wondrous, what a glorious gift, and it all is sanctified by the very presence of God!"

We must not neglect the inner as well as the outer. Our createdness, our existence, our living in this material world along with the rest of us, is a gift fraught with the presence of God! You are a divine gift to the world already!

This voice tells us not to do, do, do, but to see, see, see. Look and see, open your hearts and your minds to the wonder of this season, and be comforted.

Which to choose, the active life or the contemplative one? The experience of the Church has proven that any such tension is false. It is both the active and the contemplative lives that we need. We must live aware of God's presence, even as we act in the world in light of that presence. But the Church has also learned that the contemplative must undergird and inform the active. The active life draws its inspiration from our vital union with the heart of God. We pray, and out of our prayer we serve. Herein is the greatest comfort. In our praying we draw the world and God together, as Christ did, and in our acting we complete our praying.

Advent calls us not to inaction, but to deeply rooted and grounded action. The problem with the little advertisement from the USPS is that it wasn't grounded in the reason for the season. We, on the other hand, as people of the Incarnation, **MUST** be grounded, and then we **MUST** act.

Advent without prayer is not Advent. Advent becomes Advent as we set aside time to quiet our hearts and minds and become aware of the pervasive and transforming presence of God. So in spite of all the business, take time for what is most important, most central, most foundational. Take time to sit with God in this season. There are wonderful tools for this, Advent Calendars, Jesse Trees, Advent Wreaths, the Instagram Program I offered you two weeks ago, and a host of others.

Advent without action is not Advent. Advent becomes Advent as we take our quiet wisdom and compassion into the world. Prepare for the guests that will be in your home as preparing for the coming of the Christ Child. Give gifts that do good in the world, that proclaim the coming of the King in some loving, helpful, uplifting way. And if you are alone, find someone else who is also alone and be alone together, the two of you!

Notice, if you will, what happens when a people walk through these days grounded in truth and love. The World gets a glimpse of another way of living, one not locked in competitive economic self-interest, but rooted and grounded in a love that can only be called divine. Ah, so as the people of God live Advent as it is intended we do not win the holidays, we don't need to—but the world stands a chance to!

Comfort, comfort my people says our God!