

## ***THE WAR ON ADVENT***

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1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year A; December 1, 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14

***“Besides this, you know what time it is,  
how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.***

***For salvation is nearer to us now  
than when we became believers...”***

Romans 13:11

Maybe you’ve heard about “the War on Christmas.” The phrase started to show up in the media some years back. The people who are so alarmed by a War on Christmas warn of insidious secularizing forces bent on destroying Christianity in America. Today it’s “Season’s Greetings” and “holiday trees.” Tomorrow, who knows?

There’s nothing new about this complaint. It’s been around at least 54 years, and Christmas is still going strong. I know that because the TV special, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, is going to be 54 years old this year. (Does that make some of you feel old?)

Remember, in that story, how Charlie Brown gets fed up with all the commercialism of Christmas? Lucy’s wrought up over what presents she’s going to get, Schroeder’s a bundle of nerves on account of the Christmas pageant, and as for Snoopy, he’s strung so many Christmas lights on his doghouse, he’s about to

take down the power grid. Charlie Brown goes out and buys that scrawny little tree that bends over with the weight of a single ornament. He fears his quest to find the true meaning of Christmas is a complete failure.

That is, until Linus — that resident theologian of the *Peanuts* gang — saves the day with a simple recitation from the second chapter of Luke. Everybody remembers, then, what Christmas is really about.

Fifty-four years ago, that was controversial stuff for TV. The network executives very nearly cut the Bible reading. They were concerned it was a little too sectarian for the American viewing public.

The cartoon's creators stuck to their guns. The reading from Luke stayed in: and that scene of Linus up on stage, bathed in the spotlight as he tells of shepherds out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, has become many people's favorite part of the story — the thing they look forward to each year.

There's one little detail from that scene you may have missed, no matter how many times you've seen the cartoon. I missed it myself for quite a number of years, but now I can't see *A Charlie Brown Christmas* without thinking about it.

If you know anything about the character of Linus in that famous comic strip, it's that he's never without his security blanket. He's a bit old to be carrying

a blanket around, but it's just what he does. If anyone tries to take Linus' blanket from him — like Snoopy, in a mischievous moment — he goes ballistic: completely freaking out with anxiety, until some kind person returns it to him.

The only time in all the Peanuts comic universe when Linus voluntarily lets go of his blanket is in this very scene from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. As Linus steps up on stage to recite the Christmas story, he quietly lets go of his security blanket. It falls to his feet in a heap — forgotten, for the next couple minutes or so, as he loses himself in the story of Jesus' birth. When the Bible recitation is ended, he picks it up again and everything goes on as before. But for those few, brief moments, he's free of his anxiety.

If it's fair to say that Linus is addicted to his security blanket, it's the power of Jesus that gently leads him to freedom.

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Nobody was talking, back in 1965, about a war on Christmas. They didn't see it in such conspiratorial terms. They just complained about commercialism. Everyone knew there was a big, secular holiday laid over top of the sacred observance — and that from time to time, it could be a distraction.

I don't know about you, but the war I'm really concerned about is not the War on Christmas, but the War on Advent. Now, there's a season of the Christian

year that's really vulnerable!

How can these four puny candles on the Advent wreath compete with the light show down at the mall — or even the Christmas lights strung across Main Street?

Advent's meant to be a season of simplicity, of quiet reflection, of lighting a candle and waiting for the far greater light that is to come. During Advent, we note the shortening of the days and realize there's an awful lot of darkness in our lives. During Advent, we frankly confront our spiritual poverty, and — if we're doing it right — you and I frankly admit we could never save ourselves. We need a savior to do it for us.

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Those words I read for you today from Paul's Letter to the Romans — about the time having arrived for us to wake from sleep — bear witness to the fact that there are an awful lot of things out there, this time of year, that distract us from actively hoping for the coming of a savior. It's not the sound and fury of a culture war that threatens to knock us off our course. It's the sweet narcotic of the commercial holiday that lulls us to sleep.

There's a scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy and her companions have to go through a field of magical poppies. The Wicked Witch of the West has

cast a spell over that field. "And now, my beauties," she hisses, "something with poison in it, I think. With poison in it, but attractive to the eye, and soothing to the smell. Poppies... Poppies. Poppies will put them to sleep."

Sure enough, Dorothy, her dog Toto and the Cowardly Lion all begin yawning: and before they know it, they've fallen fast asleep. Fortunately, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man — who aren't made of flesh and blood — are immune to the narcotic effect. They cry out for help to the good witch, Glinda, who causes it to snow. The snow cancels out the aroma of the poppies, and the little band resumes their trek to the Emerald City.

Paying close attention to the season of Advent is like having a Scarecrow and a Tin Man by our side. "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep," is their cry. In a world of holiday distractions, those are saving words. They remind us that "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers."

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It's nearer to us now because some time has elapsed since the day we first accepted Christ into our hearts. No matter how long it's been — whether months or decades — since we made that spiritual commitment, we're that much closer to the day of our Lord's return.

That's a major emphasis of this season of Advent. It's a season of hope and

expectation that functions on two levels. On one level, we enter into the hope of the Jewish people more than two millennia ago, as they studied the words of the ancient prophets and looked for the coming of the Messiah. On the second level, we pay attention to Jesus' promise to return someday, to bring justice to a sinful world and to restore everything beautiful that has been tarnished by hatred and greed.

Of those two tracks of Advent, it's the second one we really need to work at staying on. The first one is easy; the second is hard. The purveyors of the commercial holiday — to such extent that they think of Advent at all — would rather we stick with the first track. It serves their purposes: opening the doors of an Advent calendar and counting down the days till Christmas is not all that different from counting down shopping days.

But waiting for the coming again of the risen and ascended Savior is something else altogether. The scriptures say he will come not on a predictable timetable, but suddenly, explosively, like a thief in the night. And about the day or the hour of his coming, no one knows — not even the holy man of old, Jesus of Nazareth himself, but only his Father in heaven.

So, we live in hope: hope of a world made new. Hope of an end to human suffering. Hope of justice rolling down like rivers, and righteousness like an ever-

flowing stream.

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There are provisions for this journey of hope: not egg nog and Christmas cookies, but bread and wine, the body and blood of the Lord who gave himself for us, and who promises to come again. When we partake of these elements at the Lord's Table, we eat and drink hope itself. We take it into ourselves, so it may grow there and sustain us through all our days.

There's a time in the Communion service when I say the words, "Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show forth the death of our Lord, until he comes." Those are Advent words, sure enough: a promise not airy and insubstantial, but rather real and physical, something we can literally chew on.

It's the promise not only of Advent, but of Christmas: of the word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth.

May you not only hear of that Advent hope today; may you not only imagine it and think about it; may you also taste it!

There *is* a War on Advent going on out there. The larger culture doesn't understand this impulse to come and commit our precious time to something so seemingly useless as worship. While there are cookies still to be baked, presents still to be selected and wrapped, the culture can't comprehend the value of simply

sitting and receiving the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper — a meal completely devoid of red-and-green sprinkles, sadly lacking in peppermint flavoring, and most certainly not soaked in rum. When Jesus broke the bread and shared the cup, it was an ordinary workingman's meal he gave them: strength to sustain them through the days of waiting to come.

Our next hymn captures this quality of Advent expectation:

**“Born thy people to deliver,  
born a child and yet a king,  
born to reign in us forever,  
now thy gracious kingdom bring.”**

Let us sing it, with hope in our hearts!

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