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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

November 27, 2011  
First Sunday of Advent

Today's sermon is taken from Isaiah, chapter 64, verses 1-9.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

I want you to relax this morning as we begin the season of Advent. It seems like everyone is rushing around us, but I want you to try to relax during Advent.

Margaret was all ready for her date; she was wearing her best outfit, her hair was fixed, her makeup was perfect. Imagine her disappointment when her date didn't show up. After an hour of waiting Margaret decided that he wasn't going to come, so she changed into her pajamas, washed off her makeup, gathered up a bunch of junk food and parked herself in front of the television for the evening. As soon as she got involved in her favorite show, there was a knock on the door, and she opened it to find her handsome date standing on the doorstep. He stared at her in shock, then said in disbelief, "I'm two hours late and you're still not ready." (laughter)

I want to welcome you all here this morning on this first Sunday of Advent. This is the Sunday we begin getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birth. The choir is preparing its special music. We're in the process. If you notice coming in this morning, the doors of the church are decorated with green wreaths with purple ribbons to remind us of Advent, and special services have been planned. It's always amazing to watch our society gear up for the celebration of Christmas -- the placement of lights, the playing of Carols before Thanksgiving, the holiday sales.

On our way back from Connecticut the other day, on Friday, we were driving along on 495, and the Wrentham outlets are at exit 15, and as you're driving along the traffic was backed up, if you can believe this, two and a half miles in either direction on 495 approaching the Wrentham outlets mall. And as I was driving by in the speed lane, I could look over and see that in the

parking lots at the mall there were people just sitting in their cars standing and waiting to try to find a parking space. Unbelievable!

The holiday sales are just amazing. Even the Post Office is affected. David Letterman is one of my favorite people to listen to; I used to try to listen to his monologue. David Letterman had a line, and he said, “Here’s is some good news out of Washington D. C.: The Post Office says that it’s ready for the big holiday Christmas crush of mail; they have already placed an order for ten million new signs that will read ‘this window closed.’” (laughter)

Well, our friends at the United States Postal Service do their best, but it’s an enormous job getting ready for Christmas. It’s an enormous job getting ready for Christmas for many of us, and one poor guy said, “I started my Christmas shopping; I shopped at three banks for a loan.” Some of you can relate to that. We barely finish with Thanksgiving and we’re already getting ready for Christmas. Of course, our Jewish friends have spent hundreds of years, even thousands of years, waiting to celebrate the coming of the Messiah; in fact, they are still waiting. They do not believe, as we do, that the Messiah has come in the person of Jesus. Twenty-five-hundred years of waiting and watching for the coming of Lord.

The prophet Isaiah was waiting on the Messiah, and he writes in this morning’s Old Testament lesson these words as he begins the sixty-fourth chapter: “O that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you, as when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil. Come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you.”

Isaiah lived in a time when the people of Israel were suffering because of their infidelity to God. Isaiah knew that the people could not save themselves. It was too late for that, and Isaiah cries out, “All of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away, and no one calls on your name or strives to lay down ahead of you, for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.”

Isaiah paints a rather stark picture if Israel’s current situation. Then on a gentler note he writes, “Yet, you Lord are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord. Do not remember our sins forever. O look on us, we pray,

for we are all your people.” Isaiah was waiting for a Savior.

Many people today, I believe, are waiting for a Savior. Did you know that? And some of them are our neighbors. I’d like to compare the plight of these people to the two young lovers in the Broadway musical *West Side Story*. As you may remember, *West Side Story* is based on Shakespeare’s classic drama *Romeo and Juliet*. In *West Side Story*, the lovers are Tony, a former member and leader of the street gang, the Jets, and Maria who has recently arrived in this country from Puerto Rico. Her brother is Bernardo, present leader of the street gang, the Sharks. Like most recent immigrants to this country, the Puerto Ricans are not accepted by those who already live here, and that animosity is intensified in the conflict between the Jets and the Sharks. In the midst of that animosity and hatred, Tony and Maria meet and fall in love. Fairly soon after realizing they are in love, they also realize there is no place for their love in the world they live in, and they sing:

*There’s a place for us, somewhere a place for us; peace and quiet and open air, wait for us somewhere. There’s a time for us, some day a time for us, time together with time to spare, time to learn, time to care, some day, somewhere. There’s a place for us, a time a place for us. Hold my hand and we’re half way there, hold my hand and I’ll take you there, somehow, some day, somewhere.*

Of course, we all know that in that world there was not a place for them. Tony is shot by a member of the Sharks as he is running to Maria; he dies in her arms. And as this is happening, the music of that song (for me one of the most beautiful songs I’ve ever heard) *Somewhere* is playing underneath all of the action. It gives added poignancy to know that there is no place, no time, no world where their love can exist. Right then for them, *somewhere* is literally nowhere.

But the power, I think of that scene, that movie, is that although that world does not yet exist for them, it could some day, and it will, and we know it. Somehow, some day, somewhere the world awaits a Savior. In the same way that Isaiah cried out, “O that you would rend the heavens and come down, many in our world still cry out for a Savior. The Savior came in the babe of Bethlehem, but still the world waits. That, I believe, is the meaning of Advent. Advent is the celebration of what has been and what is yet to come. The Savior of all the world came to us in the babe of Bethlehem, but this was simply the beginning of God’s redeeming work. A beachhead was

established, but the war over evil and darkness still has not been won. That victory will only be complete when the Savior returns and the Kingdom of God is established in this world even as it is in heaven.

It is so easy with our comfortable lives to focus on the beauty and the joy of Christmas. It is much more difficult for us to focus on Advent, that season when the world groans with birth pangs as it awaits God's final victory over sin and suffering.

They are still awaiting a savior. You'll find them in the Soviet Union, you'll find them in the Middle East, you'll find them in Afghanistan, you'll find them in Africa, you'll find them in Haiti, you'll find them in the gang-ridden neighborhoods of our inner cities, and you'll find them right here in Sandwich. Of course, it is our responsibility to reach out to these little ones, to show them the love of Jesus; but the truth of the matter is that for the most part they are forgotten this Advent season. Their only hope is that Jesus will return and usher in the kingdom promised in scripture -- a world where there will be no more suffering, no more pain, where people will live in peace and harmony, where in Isaiah's beautiful imagery: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them."

Do you not hear the cry of these little ones? "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, the Savior has come, but much of the world still awaits a savior." And here I think is the promise of scripture: Jesus will return and truly the day will come when no child will be left behind. There will some day be peace and justice in this world, and sin and suffering shall cease. It is the promise of scripture that one day the nations of the world will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

I know I've talked about it before, but it was one of the pivotal times in my young childhood. When I was eight years old my father came down with a crippling form of polio. He was out of work completely for a year and a half, and there at that time was no Workman's Comp or any way of receiving money other than the generosity of those who worked with my father, his friends and our family. But, you know, we never realized that there was a problem. My mother always seemed to have a spirit about her that kept us going. Even at Christmastime I didn't realize, but it was my father's friends and our family that bought us those gifts and buoyed us up during a time when my father was gravely ill.

And, you know, what that reminds me of every year is the Toys for Tots program here in Sandwich. It's run by the Marines of all people -- the strongest, the bravest, the most persevering in combat. The United States Marines run the Toys for Tots program, and here at St. John's every year we reach out to about two hundred fifty families in helping them to get toys for children who will not have very much at Christmas. I believe Toys for Tots is a preview of how things will be in the Kingdom of God.

And that is what Advent is really about; it's not about lights and Carols and buying presents. True, it's about preparing ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus more than two thousand years ago, but it's also about preparing ourselves in our world for the Savior's return at the end of days when things in this world will be set right. No one knows when that day will come, but I do know this -- the cries of God's children will not forever be unanswered. "O that you would rend the heavens and come down." Our Savior has come down in the manger of Bethlehem, and Jesus is coming again to answer the cries of his children for peace and justice and the end of all suffering and pain.

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs