

“The Meaning Of Advent”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who was born a babe in Bethlehem, grace to you and peace.

As most of you know the church has its own calendar and, as I said, just before we began today's service, in the church's calendar the new year begins with the first Sunday of Advent. I believe that if Advent is to mean anything in reference to a new year, we have to explore what it means in reference to Christmas, because it is closely related to Christmas. To see precisely where we got Advent, we have to begin with Christmas, which, as a Christian festival, didn't begin to be celebrated until the fourth century. That's right, it wasn't celebrated around the Christian world for almost four hundred years after Jesus had walked on this earth.

In order to better understand Christmas and Advent, we have to go back to pagan times when the celebrations started. The pagans saw the world as a great cosmic struggle between the powers of darkness and the power of light. And they noticed as they watched that at different times darkness seemed to be getting more of the light, so to speak. They were watching, if you will, two great cosmic wrestlers and every once in a while pin down the light and be ready to do it in. They noticed this because the days were getting shorter. If they were getting shorter that meant that the light, or the sun, was getting weaker. And as darkness pinned the sun to its back, and was ready to dispatch it, they noticed the sun getting weaker and those dark days getting longer and longer. And they were afraid that someday darkness would kill the sun and the light. Until around December 21.

Around December 21 they noticed that the tables began to turn and that the sun was regaining its strength. The sun suddenly got a second wind and all of a sudden was beginning to push darkness off and against the wall. They understood this because around December 21 the days started getting longer. It means that darkness was getting weak and the sun was getting strong. And so when this happened, the pagans celebrated the resurrection, or the coming, or the light of the sun. It was a sun feast, marking the transition time from darkness to light.

When the Christians came along they took over this pagan notion. They said, “It's a pretty good notion that you've got here, and after all, we know that if you're really talking about darkness and light, the only real darknesses of this world are the darkness of sin and the darkness of death. And the only light in this world is Jesus. So we'll keep the notions.

But what the Christians did, as it were, they took the word “sun” and they took out the middle letter, “u,” and they changed it to “o”. So the sun they were talking about was Jesus, the Son of God, and they made this time of year a celebration when we would get ready for the tables to be turned. In the great struggle, this was the time when sin and death would now be overcome by the light of the world, Jesus the Son of God. So they called this time Christmas, and they made Advent the time of considering an end of darkness and looking forward to the coming light.

And that's what it has meant to us Christians ever since. Christmas is the beginning. The passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the final burst and victory of the Son of God. But Christmas is the beginning, and Advent marks that time when darkness grows weaker and the sun becomes stronger. And so Advent became, and still remains for us, a time when the tide will turn. If you can see it that way, you have a good understanding of the meaning of Advent.

Friends, Advent is supposed to be a time of breakthrough – from darkness into light. It is truly our new year and that's why you notice that today's gospel reading is speaking about the end. Jesus says, “Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come.” And he talks about the sun falling and

the moon not giving its light. What Jesus is talking about is not the end of our material world, as some would think, but what Jesus and the scriptures mean is, "Okay, there is an end to darkness. Get ready to move into the light."

Advent, then, is a challenge. Advent simply comes to us very forcefully with questions. What is the struggle in your life and mine? Advent asks: "What do you want to overcome?" Advent asks: "What darkness in your life and your world would you like to see reversed?"

What breakthrough would you and I want for this new year? What tide would you like turned around? That you might be more understanding? More kind? More forgiving? Less addicted? More chaste? Holier? Closer to God? Better personality? That people would like you? That you would like yourself? That your job or your marriage would flourish? That your children or parents would change? That school would be more attractive? What dark things in your life would you like to see reversed?

Friends, if you had to pick a theme or a motif for this coming church year, what would you pick? I suspect there are any number of themes we could pick, but might I suggest that in the new year we begin today, and if we want to roll back some of the darkness that is in this world, might I suggest the motif of healing. You and I realize the incredible fact that we contain within us – within our very look, within our very hand, our very lips – the power to heal. A gesture to make somebody feel better. A smile. Picking up the telephone. A courteous note. An apology given. A love spoken. A reach outward. A very simple thing, and yet we can heal hearts and souls – and bodies. We have that power. The power to heal. Wouldn't that be a wonderful power to reclaim as our goal for the new year?

We live in darkness. Others live in darkness. We can roll it back. We can help the sun to rise. We can make the day brighter for everyone – just be a glance, by a word, by a look, by an unspoken love. And yet – we cannot do this without Jesus. If anything profound is going to happen to us this year, it will have to be in relationship with Jesus Christ.

This is as close as you are going to get to a Lutheran altar call but please hear me out. We've got to get to know Jesus better. He's not just a name, he's what draws us to the church. He's got to be a reality in our lives. He's got to be a friend. He's got to be personal. He's got to be deep. He's got to be someone that we speak of. He's got to be someone that we speak to, someone that we speak from. We've got to look at the world through his eyes and touch with his hands and hear with his ears.

If darkness is to be rolled back, it's you and I who will do it. If you're looking for something for Advent, Advent is a time when there's a turn about, the breakthrough. What breakthrough would you like? If we're to be free from sin, and from your problems and my problems, and your sins and my sins, we need each other.

In the early part of the Gospel of John, when Jesus is starting his public ministry, he asks one of the disciples, Nathaniel to follow him. Nathaniel says, "Where do you live?" And Jesus simply says, "Come and see." How about that?

Jesus, where do you live? He lives in somebody's darkness. Come and see. Somebody's hurting, somebody's in pain, somebody's in grief, somebody's struggling. Come and see. That's where Jesus is. Even those who see the most cheerful and they've got it all together, I've seen altogether too many of those people fall apart. And all that they ever wanted, all that you and I ever wanted, was to be healed with the affirming touch of another.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. If this world, if this nation, if your family and circle of people in your life, if this community, if this church, if you and I are to roll back the darkness, Advent is the time. A new year, a new beginning, a time when darkness begins to slip. And hopefully in your life and mine, the Son, Jesus, begins to rise. May it be so. AMEN.