

Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Matthew 1:18-23

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'

We'll Miss the Most Important Part
Rev. Charles Schuster
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You too, I think, are in danger of missing the most important part of Advent. You could miss it too. It could come and go and you wouldn't get it. How do I know that? I know that because three of the pastors here have already missed it, and I'm one of them. I missed it Wednesday on the corner of Pitkin and Green Street. It was a tan van parked behind a sign beside a tree. It looked lifeless, behind the sign, beside the tree. It was lifeless. No one in it, nothing moving from it, until I drove past the sign that had the number 25 and my speedometer said 40. And it sprang to life. Lights came on, a silent click of a camera, profile picture, a likeness, better than the recent Directory photo, I'm guessing, and the bill will cost me.

Two days later, this past Friday, I passed the same scene, and some good Samaritan had placed a garbage bag over the lens of the camera on the tan van. And the thought came to me, "I wish I'd thought of that," and yet through it all, I missed it. I missed the most important part. I preach it, I don't live it. Advent has a speed limit. "Slow down, Reverend, you're going to miss the most important part."

There's a vision of Advent, and to see it and understand it, we've got to slow down. It's a platitude, it's something God wants the world to know. I can say it, and you can hear it, in fact we just did, and we can ignore it. Advent has these platitudes, these sayings. Platitudes of Advent we find in the carols we sing - "O come O come Emmanuel." There's a song in the air. "Joy to the World." "Silent Night." "The Snow Lay on the Ground." "Venite Adoremus." And in the secular music we hear - "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas." "Let it Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow" - and it did. And in the words of Isaiah, the words about the wolf and the lamb together, and the child playing over the hole of the snake. The platitudes of Advent. Slow down or we'll miss it, we'll miss the most important part. God's trying to tell us that there will be a world where it will be safe for a child. We don't see it now. What we see now is a world where people kill each other in the name of their faith. What we see now is a world which is fraught with instability, leading to insanity, and the words "going postal" have a different meaning. It doesn't mean that's the place we go to receive our Christmas packages or mail them. "Going postal" includes a place like a college campus in Virginia, and this past week, a shopping mall in Nebraska. Slow down to the speed of Advent, and pay attention to the platitudes.

Jan Karon in her book *Light from Heaven*, tells a Christmas story and, I think, a good one. She writes about the Episcopal priest Timothy Kavanaugh and he was speaking to the congregation, the second Sunday of Advent. He was saying to the congregation, "As I wrote my sermon this morning, and listened to it as I preached it at home before I came over here, I began to realize that I was going to be telling you more about Advent than you really need to know. And then I got to thinking about something that happened this week," and he pointed to the pulpit. He said, "You see this pulpit here?" This is the one that had been hand-made and hand-carved by members of our church, Clarence Merton.

And her reminded the congregation that the pulpit had been made before there was any assurance there would ever be a church. Why did Clarence do that? “Why did he do that, when there hadn’t even been a church, make a pulpit? Clarence did it for the glory of God. Well, this week, vandals” the priest said, “vandals broke into our church and took a knife and did their own carving on this magnificent pulpit. It’s on this side,” he said, and invited the congregation to look, if they hadn’t seen it. And then Father Kavanaugh said, “This vandalism is the most profound sermon that could be preached from this pulpit or any pulpit anywhere. It reads, “J.C loves C.M.” J.C. loves C.M.”

When Agnes and Clarence saw it, they might have wept. But what did they do? They gave thanks. They might have felt it was a sacrilege, but what did they do? They considered it a word from God. J.C. – Jesus Christ loves C.M. – Clarence Merton.” That inscription was filled with truth, not just for Clarence, but for every one of us. God makes it clear God loves us, not merely the faceless world population, but one by one. Jesus Christ, God loves you, Martha. God loves you, Mary. God loves you, Jubal. God loves you, Wayne. Here’s what we’re going to do,” the pastor said. “Clarence is bringing a piece of white oak. We want you all to carve your names on this piece of wood, and we’re going to put this board on the wall. We’re going to invite people who join us in our congregation in the years to come, and they’ll see that on the wall. It will remind all of us that we are loved by God.”

It’s a platitude. It says God loves us. It’s a saying, something God wants us to know, like the words Isaiah spoke, Isaiah speaking for God, imagining a world that would be safe for children, and the wolf and the sheep together, and the child playing over the hole of the snake, and the child in a world where there is no danger. A little child will lead them. A little child will remind us God loves us. A little child reminds us how it’s supposed to be.

It probably happened in a Sunday School class when a teacher asked the students in the class, “Why do you think that Mary and Joseph took their baby Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt?” And one child, being a child, would have answered as a child would answer, appropriate to the question. “Well, Mary and Joseph took their baby Jesus to Egypt from Bethlehem probably because they couldn’t find a babysitter.” That’s so much a better story than the one that Matthew tells, because Matthew suggest that Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to Egypt because King Herod wanted to kill the child. There will come a time, Isaiah says, when we will have a world that will be safe for little children. There will come a time when war will end and peace will come and trust will be restored and innocence will be allowed. It means that love will light the candle that hate cannot blow out. And some will say, “You’ve got to be realistic. Isaiah said that eight hundred years before Christ, that’s three thousand years ago, it hasn’t happened yet.” To which we respond precisely that is correct, and therein is the problem. Maybe this year we’ll hear the platitude and pay attention. Maybe this year we won’t miss the most important part.

And for those of us that have become cynical, we think that there can be no effect of Christmas upon the human race, Caroline Kennedy in her book *A Family Christmas* reminds us of something that happened during World War I. German soldiers and

American soldiers on Christmas day declared a truce, came together, exchanged prisoners, wounded, exchanged gifts, sang carols, remembered the birth of the Christ child. It can make a difference. Advent gives us a vision of the world as it's supposed to be, but we've got to slow down to see it. It's the platitude, the vision, a word from God.

Advent gives us something even more, I think, specific. Advent gives us platitudes or sayings from God, but Advent also gives an imperative, an imperative that speaks to each one of us. It tells us each what we must do individually to make it happen. But we miss it, because we're more concerned with the package than we are the product. I mentioned that three of our clergy, we have already missed the most important part, I being one of them, the other two clergy have as well. To point out as I do this story, I don't mean to imply that any one of them is worse than any one of us, we are not exonerated because of what they did, and perhaps to suggest that we wouldn't have, because we would have. They missed the imperative of Advent, and here's how. Reverend Dalke and Reverend Miller missed it. I submit to you that they missed it worse than I did, and their egregious sin involved wreath delivery for the women of the church. "Take this wreath to the office downtown. They bought it, you deliver it." And they did. The office manager or boss was so pleased to see them when they came in the door with the wreath that she ordered and paid for, she smiled big and thanked them loud, and she was nailing the thing on the wall when they left her office and returned to their car. And then they realized that they had given her the wrong wreath. The one she paid for was twenty dollars; the one they took was forty. Pastors, ordained by God, humble servants of Jesus, but on a mission for the UMW, huddled. What to do? Forty dollars, twenty dollars. Back they went. They took her forty dollar wreath off the wall and gave her the twenty dollar one and left the office. She was not smiling when they left. They sucked Advent joy right out of the middle of the city, David and Ray, on a mission for the women of the church. Only later did they learn that the only difference between the wreath she bought, and the wreath they first took her, was the box.

The imperative of Advent reminds us to see what's in the box, to see what's in the heart. The imperative of Advent takes into consideration the gift that is given and not the cost. It cares about the spirit of the giver and the joy of the one who receives it. It speaks to each of us and it reminds us that something is being asked of us. What is being asked of you? What is being asked of us this year? What is being asked this year to make God's vision real – specifically asked of us. The imperative of Advent comes in a variety of ways. It is interesting to see the differences in the birth narratives, Jesus' birth narratives. Luke, for the most part, has God speak through angels, whereas Matthew, for the most part, has God speak through dreams, not angels. In either case, dreams or angels, there is imperative. Something is being asked of somebody. Something is being required. Joseph heard God speaking in a dream. Mary heard God's voice through the angel, and for us, if we don't see or hear the imperative, we're missing the most important part of Advent.

There is a church, it's a Methodist church, they tried to help a little boy who was sick. He needed bone marrow matched, and this church in Alabama organized itself, and people signed up and you had to be 18, you couldn't be over 60, just a swab in the mouth, that was all it was. They raised money also to offset the boy's expenses. No match was found

for the child in the church, but it's a national registry, and a match was found, and they did a good thing. They did a really good thing, something like we're going to try to do next Sunday. There was a dinner held, to thank the volunteers. The pastor of the church, John Ed Matheson is his name, on the way to the dinner a phone call, a member of the church who had been especially ill, they hadn't seen her for a while, and she said to him, "Guess what? I just got a call. They just found a match for me. It's probably in another state, but they found a match for me." And she said, "Now I have a chance to live." It's funny how one thing leads to another, and the pastor announced that at the dinner, saying "One of our members found a match from the national registry, just the right person, she just called to tell me." There was silence. Someone from the back of the room shrieked. She stood up. "I just got a phone call from the national registry. They found in my blood a match. They told me I had a chance to help save someone's life." Two people matched. An imperative responded to. Two people from the same town. Two people from the same part of town, and two people from the same church. Funny how things come together when people respond to the imperative of Advent to make the world what the world is supposed to be.

Lisa will tell you. Forty-nine years old, active in our church, taught Sunday school for sixteen years, Vacation Bible School every summer, works with the youth of our church now. A speech therapist, does good for people. Thirteen years ago a blood disorder, now it's leukemia, but there's a cure. It involves bone marrow transplant. Her sisters are not a match. Lisa, Sunday School teacher, youth worker, member of our church, wonders if the church can help. I bet we can. We're hoping that we'll hear the imperative of Advent telling us to do something, telling us to register next Sunday, Lisa in our church, somebody we would want to help if we could, and if not Lisa, maybe someone else.

Some time between now and Christmas, we will hear the imperative of Advent when something will be asked of us to make the world what the world ought to be. Maybe it will be something we've never done before, and we'll have an opportunity to learn some new talent. Maybe it will be something that we would have thought we didn't ever want to do, and the result was we'll discover a side of ourselves we never saw before. Maybe it'll be something big and lots of people will see us do it and they will think we're a hero for having done it. Or maybe it will be something that some consider, as they look at what we've done, responding to it, thinking of us as less than they had, but we did what we knew was right. Or maybe it will be something small and nobody will notice, except ourselves.

Marilyn Brown Odin in her book *The Manger and the Mystery* reminds us when we recall the Christmas story, we restore a call from God. We will miss the most important part if we overlook the platitudes of Advent and don't think God is serious when the prophet Isaiah reminds of the world as it ought to be, where it is safe for children. And we will miss the most important part of Advent if we deflect the imperatives of Advent and neglect the fact that something is being asked of us to make the world be what God would want it to be and needs it to be. Tex Sample is a pastor. He's also a professor at Saint Paul's Seminary in Kansas City. He found himself at a Christmas party, talking to two people he had never met. "Be careful, honey. Be careful what you say, this man is a

minister. What kind of a minister are you?" she said. United Methodist, he said. "I used to be a Methodist, but I'm not any more. Now I'm into Native American spirituality. Which tribe do I practice, you ask? I've never done anything like that. Do I have a shaman or a holy person? Oh dear God, I'd never do that. Is there a group I meet with, to practice my spirituality? Are you kidding me? I can't imagine such a thing. Yeah, I'm into Native American spirituality. Why? How? Well, I read a book, and I saw the movie *Dances With Wolves*." And Tex Sample thought to himself, "This is what scholars who study such things call 'mere belief'". Mere belief is the idea that you can engage in matters of ultimate commitment merely by believing in them. Mere belief – I call it missing the most important part of Advent.