

## “FALLING BACK IN LOVE”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2016

Text: Matthew 11:2-11

Happy Advent! Or should I say that? How do we understand the season?

Let me call your attention to the shields on the ceiling, painted by Pastor Elder with members of Bethlehem many years ago.

Many years ago.

I emphasize that because things have changed a lot since those shields were painted. For example:

The first four shields on the top on each side represent the four Sundays of Advent, as they were observed in those days, and for centuries before.

They represent, on the south side:

1. A star symbolizing the Creator’s work of creation (its six points standing for six days)
2. A flaming sword, from the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden.
3. Two tablets, for the Ten Commandments
4. Symbols of the rustic diet and clothing of John the Baptist.

On the north side:

1. A globe encircled by a serpent, from the story of the fall in Genesis 3
2. The Ark of Noah, so we don’t forget the Great flood.
3. Symbols of the time Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac
4. The door lintel and door jams smeared with blood, reminding us of when God saved Israel from destruction.

These are certainly reminders of the covenant promise of God to save his people, but they are overwhelmingly gory and demanding. They

represent a focus on repenting for our sins. They are, in a sense, reminders to us who are out of line that we should “get back in line.”

Those eight shields are faded, but originally the backgrounds were purple, which used to be the color of Advent because the time was seen almost as a little “Lent,” a season of repentance.

If we were to paint those shields today, not only would the background color be blue—for hope—but the themes of the Sundays would be quite different. Now, we think of Advent as a season of Hope. Quite a reform has been effected in the church, thanks to our thinking more deeply and carefully about what Advent means.

Now we think of Advent not as a time for “getting back in line” but for “falling back in love.” Falling in love again with God. Not with a God who gives “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” on us depending on how closely we resemble Jesus, but a God who gives us thumbs up to all who simply receive Jesus—which is what we prepare all Advent to do at Christmas time. We prepare to receive the Baby Jesus as the face of the God of all mercy and consolation, who has sent his Son to set us free.

Not a season to “get back in line,” but to “fall back in love.”

To judge by the songs in the stores and on the radio and by decorations all over the place, and by other atmospheric elements, the coming of Jesus should be anticipated with joy, not trepidation. The birth of the Messiah is about gladness. Not about judgment, not about repentance, but about something wonderful God has done.

If we make this season all about us, about our preparations and our mood and our celebration, our having the right amount of fun,

If the focus is on us, there will be a lot of stress in the run-up to December 25. But Christmas—and therefore Advent—is not about us but about Jesus, whom we anticipate and celebrate.

Today's gospel tells us that when John the Baptist sent his disciples to inquire of Jesus who he was, Jesus replied like this:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

Notice, he did not say:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and those who have eyes are losing their vision; the lame walk, and bad people get what's coming to them. The poor have good news brought to them, and the rich are sent home to think about what they've done wrong.

The reason I highlight this distinction is so you will not misunderstand the Magnificat. You think you are hearing Mary say that God brings justice through Jesus, equalizing things, showing mercy to the poor and destroying the rich. But although the Magnificat and the words of Jesus are quite different, it is the words from our gospel today which need to be used to understand the Magnificat, not the other way around.

Truly, in this shameful world, we do need—we always need, Advent or no Advent—to search our souls and repent of our failures. We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved God with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Yea and amen to all of that. We deserve, like the mighty and the proud, to be sent away. And we shall—if we try to live without God.

But Jesus is not coming to send us away but gather us in. The proof of his identity could not be better expressed than in the positivity of what he told John's disciples:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

Which is not to say "Blessed is anyone who is a great disciple of mine," but "Blessed is anyone who receives me."

On the first Sunday of Advent, one of our hymns was "O Lord, How Shall I Receive you." And look how wonderfully Peter is helping us proclaim the good news to each other today by choosing hymns that express how we wish to receive this great and good Lord: Hymns that say "Awake! Awake, and greet the new morn." "Prepare the royal highway." ("Lost in the night" starts out in the darkness but concludes "Come and save us soon!") Then we shout "Hail to the Lord's anointed." Finally, "Fling wide the door!"

How shall we receive Christ? Like that. With joy. Like people who are in love with the God who expresses himself singularly in a Messiah like Jesus.

Hope is our theme, the blue of the heavens our color, as we await the unambiguously wonderful event of the coming of the Son of God to redeem us from our sin and free us to be his children, to live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting innocence, righteousness, and blessedness.

Happy Advent. This is a season for "falling back in love"--with our God.

Amen.