

CONSIDERING ADOPTION

Texts on the First Sunday of Advent

November 30, 2008

Romans 1: 1-7; Mark 1: 1-11

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. We call it a time of preparation or waiting. But waiting and preparing for what? Christmas? The birth of Jesus? We may need to be born again, but does Jesus? Of course the holidays require lots of preparation—cards and cookies and presents to wrap, but that’s not what they mean by Advent preparation. You see the difficulty: If we are getting ready for something we already understand because we’ve done it before—well, that’s very nice, but it’s not the birth of Christ. Jesus says, “Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an *unexpected* hour.” (Matthew 24:44) How can getting ready for something we have tamely scheduled for the 25th of December have anything to do with Christ’s coming at an unexpected hour?

Let’s be simple. The annual festivals of a culture can be very satisfying and refreshing. What happens now, if you’re not too lonely, seems to weave the threads of your life into the fabric of family and friends forever. That is worth a great deal. As good as it can be, however, it is not what religion is for. It is just not good enough for you—for who you are in the eye of God. Would God merely have you see again what you have already seen? No. God wants to show you Presence not yet seen.

Advent is time set apart to prepare for the presence of God—not because the Son will come for you on December 25, but set apart because our minds are so easily distracted by our pains and pleasures. Because the message *Pay attention, God is coming down* is too much for us; we stop listening, we lose faith. To allow for our weakness, then, only a little time is set aside—only a few weeks. This is a time to go home, if you will, by a different route, day by day, asking God to give you the grace to hear what you have not yet heard, to see what you have not seen. Not the baby Jesus in a manger. Not the old Christmas carols, which almost make you cry. You know these all too well. No, but a new birth.



Throughout Advent, we are going to listen to just the openings of gospels and the letters of the New Testament. The very first words of these books were chosen carefully. They were read aloud to people who couldn’t read. They were sent to wake up the spirits of people pummeled with doubt and fear—people like you and me. The first thing they said about Jesus was meant to catch the people’s attention, not with terror, but with trust and hope for a new birth. What did they say?

Today, we hear the earliest New Testament voices, Paul and Mark. Paul wrote all his letters before any gospel was written. Mark, most scholars agree, set down his stories more than a dozen years after Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. The other gospel writers we’ll read in coming weeks. All the rest composed their gospels ten, fifteen, or even twenty-five years after Mark wrote. So listen now to the first words from the earliest Christian writers. Here is Paul. *[Read Romans 1: 1-7]*

Paul calls Jesus the Son of God. Now, how do you get to be someone’s son? Usually, you’re born that way. But Paul’s story doesn’t sound like it’s ready for Christmas Eve. There is no Christmas story here, and you won’t find one in any of his letters. The bold essentials of Paul’s birth narrative are these: *This is the gospel concerning God’s son, who came from David’s seed, according to the flesh, and was declared Son of God, according to the Spirit, by resurrection from the dead.* Let’s hear that once more even more simply. Paul says Jesus was born in the ordinary way to a father and mother who had King David somewhere in their family tree. And how does Jesus become Son of God? He is declared “Son of God,” says Paul. How does God make that declaration? Spiritually—by the resurrection. In other words, Jesus is adopted.

Now let’s read the opening of Mark’s gospel. *[Read Mark 1: 1-11]*

Mark also calls Jesus God's Son. Here, Jesus comes into the scene, but he is already a grown man. No shepherds, no kings, no angels, no star. Mother Mary doesn't have a part anywhere in Mark's story until the very end, when she appears among a group of women grieving at her son up on a cross. Joseph is never mentioned at all. So when does Jesus become son of God? Mark says it happens at Jesus' baptism, when a voice from heaven, sounding out Psalm 2, cries "You are my Son, the beloved." In other words, Jesus is adopted. It's funny: we adults are always so unsure when to tell the children that someone is adopted. *They might not understand—wait till they're old enough.* Well? Are you old enough? According to Paul and Mark, Jesus wasn't born God's son; he was adopted.

Of course, ideas that come from our own ordinary understanding, like adoption, cannot possibly account for what God does. But then, that's always the case when we speak of the Divine; we have no language for God except concrete things we do understand. So let's play. When God was considering adoption, and went to the orphanage of all humanity, and looked through the cosmic window at the faces of the children for the one just right to adopt, what was God looking for? A certain race or sex? Gold stars for Sabbath school attendance? A good reference from the birth parents? A fine resume?

Paul and Mark have an opinion—no, an experience—about this. It is how they open their gospel. They say: To receive God's good news in Christ Jesus, you don't need to know anything about his birth or childhood or young adulthood, for God adopted him—by his resurrection, says Paul; in his baptism, says Mark. Considering adoption, God did not need for Jesus to have already scored a perfect ten. Why, if Jesus had never done anything wrong, where would such perfect power have come from? From himself? He denies it. A seeker came to him, calling, 'Good Teacher—' "Why do you call me good?" Jesus interrupts. "No one is good but God alone."

In showing no concern at all for Jesus' early life, Paul and Mark set the charges for some explosive good news. Knowing who he is makes it possible for him to do what he does—not the other way around! *Not* good work gets him good favor and a good position, but first the declaration—"You are my son"—and *then* the good work begins. In the churches where Paul and Mark ministered, Christian faith was born with no back story to Jesus' life but this, that God chose a flesh-and-blood man to overturn the world in its sorrow and its error.

What can this mean for you and for me and for a world still unconvinced of forgiveness and freedom? Never mind that adoption is a metaphor, or that there was no orphanage and no adoption papers. The adoption story is a way of making sense of two striking things. One, that Jesus was ordinary. He had half his DNA from a woman, half from a man. He was like us. But two, that he was not ordinary. In him, say Paul and Mark, we experienced something new under the sun, something not like us, something we did not expect before we met him—namely, that there is a kind of life which nothing can extinguish, and that that life which is in Jesus Christ . . . is in us, and we are in that life. We weren't given that life because we deserved it or earned it. In fact, that life has always been in us, and we in it—but we did not always know that. And so we thought our life was the sum of all our fears and hopes, our strengths and weaknesses jumbled together. And we were anxious and we hurt others sometimes, and our self. Because we did not remember who we were, who God says we are.

That is what Advent is for: to prepare to hear Jesus as God's word, recalling you to who you are, and to life which nothing can extinguish; life born not of the flesh, but in the power of Holy Spirit. You did not see it until you saw him. Now you prepare to receive him, each night or each morning: a time of quiet, perhaps a candle burning during a time of prayer. A time of listening carefully in your family. Will you do it? Then, as if from a messenger gone before to prepare the way, perhaps you will hear God's ancient word. "Be not afraid." Or again, "Lo, I am with you always." And in this way, through this coming of Jesus at an hour you did not expect, you see the eye of God on you, considering adoption.

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