

Coming Soon to a Neighborhood Near You
Romans 13:11-14 and Matthew 24:36-44
November 27, 2016

Advent is finally here. You don't have to feel badly about lighting red candles and humming, "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." But, we as a society, really do rush the season. Part of it has to do with retail wanting to take in as much cash as possible. Some of it has to do with our understanding of who Jesus really is. Christology is the study of the person, role, and nature of Christ. Some people hold a high Christology that looks at Jesus first as the divine Son of God, and then moving down to see him as a human person. Low Christology begins with the thinking of the Council of Chalcedon, which took place in 451 CE, where Jesus is understood as being like us in everything but sin. The Nicene Creed announces that Jesus is "of one being with the Father," but that "for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven." The hymn, "In the Bleak Midwinter" expresses it this way: "Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain." Jesus is completely God and completely human – therein lies the mystery.

I am convinced that our rushing of the Christmas season is due to our desire to have a controlling stranglehold on Jesus. A baby in a manger is not a threat to our way of living. As long as we keep him there, not much is expected of us. We rush to start and end the season because we know of that other Jesus who told us that the lilies of the field and the birds of the air do not worry, but we like our worries. This same adult Jesus told us that if someone wants our coat we should give it and the shirt off our backs as well. He teaches that those who try to follow all the rules sometimes have a log in their eyes and that the poor are going to make out better than those of us who have worked so hard for what we have. No wonder we kick Christmas to the curb on December 26!

We often hear how our country was founded as a Christian nation. Our forebears claimed Christianity, but it was a form of Deism that grew out of the Enlightenment. They believed that God created all that is and set it in motion, much like a watchmaker making a watch. God wound creation up and left it to take care of itself. God was totally other, far away, seemingly not all that interested. Most of us understand God as one who is intimately part of our lives. God makes a difference to us and we make a difference to God. Our God wants to be in relationship with us. In fact, according to John 3:16-17, God loved us so much that God sent the only-begotten Son, the Messiah, that we might be saved. God's Son didn't come to condemn but to give life. This is not a disinterested God. This is a God whose very being is defined as "love."

For that very reason, we cannot fall asleep at the switch. The epistle lesson reminds us that the time of salvation is getting ever nearer. When I was a student at the University of Miami, I saw some graffiti that speaks the Advent theme: "Be alert. The world needs more *lerts*." The readings of the First Sunday in Advent do not talk about babies and

mangers and visits from shepherds and kings. It speaks of Jesus' return and the setting right of all that has gone wrong in the world. Jesus came that we might be reconciled to God. He lived among us as one who shows what it means to be in loving relationship with the living God. The gospel also tells us to be ready, because we do not know when this final sorting out of the world will happen. We are called to be awake and ready. We are called to more than readiness, though.

We have seen in this worship service that God comes to us in the Word contained in scripture. God comes to us in the Word, who is Jesus, the Christ. This Advent, we are focusing on the words of John, "The Word was made flesh and came to live among us." Eugene Peterson has translated this as, "The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood." Where do you find God in your neighborhood?

This week, a friend of mine suggested an older movie that depicts this well. It is the 1963 Sidney Poitier film, "The Lilies of the Field." Sidney's character, Homer Smith, is a sort of handyman driving in the desert, and his car overheats. He goes and gets water from a group of women, who turn out to be nuns from Germany. The mother superior immediately thanks God for sending her a strong man. Homer becomes convinced to stay for a day or two to repair the roof on the house. There is tension going both ways. Mother Maria tells Homer God sent him to build her a chapel, which she pronounces as "shapel." He works at it for a while, but they run out of building materials. He eventually leaves, but comes back and the townspeople start showing up with building materials. They want a proper church for their children and grandchildren. They offer to help, but Homer wants to do it all himself. He is crushed under the burden of the work and he learns the important lesson that God shows up in the community. This black man, looking different from the Mexican locals and the German nuns, is in many ways a Jesus figure, bringing together healing, wholeness, and community. At the same time, he is also changed by the community. At every turn in this movie, Jesus shows up in the neighborhood.

Jesus shows up here as well. This week I received the annual report for The Gathering for the past fiscal year. The Gathering is the feeding program for which we bake thousands of muffins and make so many peanut and jelly sandwiches. In the last fiscal year, they served 92,832 meals. 15,600 bag lunches were prepared and handed out. Jesus managed to serve 5000 in one instance and 4000 in another, but over 92,000 meals is impressive! On Monday evenings and Saturday mornings, you have been the face of God for people struggling to find hope. You have become their hope as you have been the hands and feet of Jesus.

We are part of a larger interfaith community that does amazing things. The Jews have a concept they call "tikkun olam." It means repairing the world. My colleague, Rabbi Dan Danson from Congregation Sinai in Wausau has written about this notion of repairing the world. That phrase goes back to the 2nd Christian century and a prayer known as the

Aleinu prayer. It contains the line “L’taken olam b’malchut shaddai” which means “to perfect the world under the kingdom of God.” It is mentioned in later writings, but in the 20th century, it took on a life of its own. In the 1950s, the director of the Brandeis Camp Institute in California, Shlomo Bardin, referred to tikkun olam as the obligation for Jews to work for a more perfect world. By 1970, Conservative Judaism’s United Synagogue Youth adopted this idea as their moniker. It has come to mean *tzedakah*, or works or righteousness and justice, as well as *gimilut chasadim*, acts of compassion. The Jewish people have understood that these works, when we do them from our own thinking and on our own behalf can become weighed down with politics. Our work to repair the world must be doing God’s work in the world. It is a way of making God flesh and blood in the world.

When we think about God working through us in the world, it is an incarnational way of viewing our theology. This idea of the Word being made flesh is truly incarnation. It is a figurative way of putting meat on the bones of God and making a difference in the world.

This Advent, I invite you to join an adventurous journey. Here at Tosa Avenue, we have many ways in which we are showing that God has moved into the neighborhood. Take off the blinders that help you make it through daily life without becoming too involved in repairing the world. Look around and see what God has placed before you. Be alert. Stay awake. Don’t let another Christmas go by where you have been busy, but not fulfilled. You are loved and the response to being loved is to love. The world tells us to ignore others and take care of ourselves. Taking care of others may be the best way to care for ourselves. What will you do this week? What will you do the season? How will you respond to God’s living Word – the Word made flesh around you and in you?