

December 6, 2020

The Second Sunday in Advent

Year B

Mark 1:1-8

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA

Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Pastor Amanda Warner

Boston Globe Article Quoted: *We're decorating for Christmas early this year, with our joy reserves at an all-time low*

*Christmas trees before Thanksgiving. Inflatable snowmen when it's 70 degrees out.*

*Santa's not coming to town — he's already here.* Beth Teitell November 13, 2020

Song *We Need a Little Christmas* by Jerry Herman (from *Mame*)

### We Need a Little Jesus Now

I was not in a festive mood. It was a couple of days before what was sure to be a very different Thanksgiving than the Thanksgivings that we've enjoyed since we've lived here in Norwood, but still, Thanksgiving is an important holiday and I had still had to get ready. I still had to do some cleaning and tidying up, to help the holiday feel like a holiday. So, as I ran up and down the stairs, doing things myself and assigning the kids tasks to help, it's possible that I was forgetting to feel thankful for the abundance of our possessions, which at that point seemed more like things that existed to collect dust or to be put in places where they didn't belong.

And then I walked into my living room and I was caught, like a deer in headlights. Our neighbors across the street had put up their Christmas lights. All of their Christmas lights. And they have never had a shy or reserved Christmas display. There were multiple inflatables on their lawn, and so many lights, bright colors, casting their glow across the street and into our living room.

To be honest with you, the burst of Christmas cheer shining in from my front window did not improve my mood. I was more like, "Bah Humbug!"

It was the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. I was still getting my house ready for Thanksgiving, and they were ready, at least outwardly for Christmas. My resentment of their festive display was less of a judgmental sense that people shouldn't decorate for Christmas before Thanksgiving, than it was just a sense of resentment that they had the time to think about Christmas before Thanksgiving.

But they were not alone. Decorating for Christmas before Thanksgiving, what some might call "early", was the craze that swept the nation this year. That same night, the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, when I was scrolling through Facebook, I saw more pictures than I could count of friends' homes decorated for Christmas and of their beautifully decorated Christmas trees.

Now, I'm not here to judge when anyone decorates for Christmas, puts up their decorations or takes their decorations down, but for sure, this year is different from other years, in this way as in so many others. And it seems that the reason for the change in people's Christmas decorating schedule has to do precisely with how different this year has been.

Since I was interested in this phenomenon, I looked into it on the internet and found an article in the Boston Globe dated November 13, 2020 almost two full weeks before Thanksgiving, about people who were decorating early the December holidays.

Here are some of the motivations of the people who had put up their holiday decorations weeks before Thanksgiving:

"People need something to make them feel good."

"I feel like these small things help bring a little bit of happiness in an otherwise weird year."

“I want people to look at it and not worry about anything for the next 10 minutes.”

“The decorations lift everyone’s spirits.”

What was the article’s author’s response to all of this November holiday cheer?

“The armies of nutcrackers and lights and huge snowflakes look nice, but in reality, they’re a festive cry for help, a Hail Mary to make up for birthday parties that weren’t, a summer that wasn’t, a Thanksgiving that won’t.”

My response was to start singing a song from the musical *Mame*, when, after Auntie Mame lost her fortune at the beginning of the Great Depression, she sang to her nephew:

Haul out  
The holly  
Put up the tree  
Before my spirit  
Falls again  
Fill up  
The stocking  
I may be  
Rushing things  
But  
Deck the halls  
Again now

For we need

A little Christmas  
Right  
This very minute  
Candles  
In the window  
Carols  
At the spinet

Yes  
We need  
A little Christmas  
Right  
This very minute  
It hasn't snowed  
A single flurry  
But Santa, dear  
We're in a hurry

So climb  
Down the chimney  
Turn on  
The brightest  
String of lights  
I've ever seen  
Slice up  
The fruitcake  
It's time  
We hung  
Some tinsel  
On that  
Evergreen bough

For I've grown  
A little leaner  
Grown  
A little colder  
Grown  
A little sadder

Grown  
A little older

And I need  
A little angel  
Sitting  
On my shoulder  
Need a little  
Christmas now

There's a sense out there that we should just jump feet first into Christmas as a balm to heal our weary hearts, our weary spirits, our bad news glutted minds. But then we turn to today's gospel reading, and we do not find Christmas.

I'm grateful to my daughter, Abigail, who is my pop culture reference researcher, and who found me a meme that I had seen float across my Facebook page, probably months before Advent began. I'll admit, this one is not actually pop culture, it's possible that it's only entertaining to people who are interested in gospel comparisons, but because it's a meme, I didn't know how to find it again.

So, I turned to Abigail, who found it and texted it to me in less than five minutes, and then asked, "Mom, why is that funny?"

It's images that are supposedly of the authors of the four gospels, divided into four quadrants.

The top left has Matthew and under him it says, "Before I begin, let me give you the genealogy of Jesus so that you know this is about a real person."

The top right has Luke and under him it says, "Before I begin let me tell you the backstory that led up to this."

The bottom left has John and under him it says, “Before I begin, let me explain why it’s important to believe that Jesus is the Son of God.”

The bottom right has Mark, only it’s not a medieval picture or icon of Mark the gospel writer. It’s a picture of Shang from the animated version of Disney’s *Mulan* and under him it says, “Let’s get down to business...”

Like I said, it’s funny to me.

Because that’s exactly happens in the gospel of Mark. Mark has no time for Christmas. Mark starts his gospel like this, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

That’s the only introduction that we get before Mark gets down to business, in the wilderness with John the Baptist, who is announcing, not Jesus’ birth, but the beginning of his public ministry.

There’s no Mary, no Joseph, no Elizabeth or Zechariah, no angels, no shepherds, no stables, no stars, no wise men, nobody you find in a nativity scene, nothing you could make a Christmas pageant about, just a wild, charismatic preacher and prophet, who wore animal skins, and ate bugs and honey, crying out in the wilderness that we should prepare. Prepare for the one who was coming with power. Prepare for the one whose coming was good news. Prepare for the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The gospel of Mark has no time for Christmas. No time for lengthy introductions or preambles. No time to set the stage or provide context for Jesus’ life, or to muse about the theological implications of it all.

No, Mark was in a rush to get to the heart of the matter. To get to the point of it all, to get to the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

All of the gospels were written to specific communities, to address those communities’ specific needs. It is only the work of the Holy Spirit that has

kept these ancient writings relevant and meaningful, comforting and challenging for generations of Christians. Unfortunately, none of the gospel writers told us much about the communities that they were writing to. They told us even less about themselves. Even their names are only guesses passed on in the traditions of the church. Scholars have had to reconstruct what little we can know about the original communities that the gospels were written to from clues within the gospels themselves.

The general sense is that Mark's gospel was the earliest gospel written and that it was written sometime between A.D. 65-75, so either in the years immediately before or immediately after the destruction of the Temple of in Jerusalem which happened in the year 70. That event, and the revolt and war which caused it, which lasted from AD 66-73, reverberated through the Jewish diaspora and therefore, through the Jewish adjacent, though largely gentile, church. At the same time of that upheaval in the land that had given birth to Christianity, the first generation of Christians were dying out, due to persecutions, but also, and mostly, due to the passage of time.

Both of those things would have led to a sense of urgency that the community's stories about Jesus be written down, preserved for future generations, so that people could have an understanding of who Jesus was and what it meant to be a Christian. They needed those stories so that they could keep their faith strong and growing, even when times were hard. They needed stories that told them that Jesus brought good news, even when the news around them was not so good.

Mark's gospel places us squarely in an Advent that does not point us to Christmas, but that points us to Christ. It points us not to a birth, not to a

holiday, but to the coming of the one who brings good news to a scared and weary people, who are living through a time of change and turmoil.

Mark's gospel tells us the truth that we need a little Jesus, right this very minute. And it tells us good news, Jesus is here and Jesus is coming!

As they do every year, the Christmas decorations will go up slowly at our house, not for any particularly liturgical reason or any homage to Advent, simply because we have to fit the project around the rest of our life, which has though it has changed dramatically in the past year, has not slowed down significantly, in spite of the pandemic.

But still, I'm with everyone out there who is yearning for some joy, some fun, some relaxation of the stress of this year, everyone who is yearning for this year to end and for something good to come.

So, let the lights shine bright, let the carols play in our homes and in the stores, that we might not even go to this year, and let cards be mailed and let us extend socially distanced and masked greetings with our friends and our neighbors and even strangers, whether those greetings are "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Hanukah" or "Happy Holidays". Whatever it takes for us to help each other, to support each other, to keep our collective spirits up. Whatever it takes to get us through the long, difficult, and scary winter of pandemic that faces us.

Maybe we do need a little Christmas now.

But what I truly want, what I truly need can't be found in the manufactured joy in a secular holiday season. What I truly want is found in the words of the gospel of Mark, who was so eager to get to Jesus that he skipped Christmas altogether.



What I need, what we need, this year, every year, all the time is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We need the Advent, the coming, of the powerful one, who does and who will heal us, who gives us new vision, gives us courage, gives us strength to face whatever comes, and who does and who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit. O come, O come, Emmanuel. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!