

Making Room

11/30/2008...First Sunday of Advent.

Let me be the first to wish you a happy new year! Wow, you are probably saying to yourself, he's just skipped Christmas all together! What is the matter with this pastor, anyway!

But today is the first day in the season of advent. The word Advent means the coming...it is the time when we remember and celebrate the coming of God's gift to the world, Jesus. And advent is the beginning of the Christian calendar. The Christian calendar is not focused on a change in the thermostat or the movement of the seasons...but rather on the life of Christ. The seasons revolve around his story and ours.

It begins with Advent, the promise of Christ's coming. The prophet told of Jesus' birth and predicted his life and his death hundreds of years before his birth. In the season of Advent we celebrate a new beginning for humanity and for ourselves. This is quickly followed by Christmas, remembering how God's only begotten Son comes into the world not in a mansion or on the clouds in glory...but born among us, born in a stable because there was no room for him anywhere else. The calendar moves on to the heart of the Gospel story, the Passion of Christ which demonstrates the wonderful, amazing love of God. We need not ever wonder how God feels about us or whether he cares for us or even likes us...we do not need to be afraid that God wishes to punish or condemn us...For God demonstrates his great love for us in that while we are still sinning, Christ dies for us. Jesus' death and resurrection are the center piece of the story of God's love and salvation. They are followed by the coming of the Holy Spirit...the comforter and the advocate and helper...who will not just be with us, but will be in us!

The Christian calendar ends with the season of Kingdomtide, where we see the message of Christ going out to the world and we wait for

Christ's kingdom to come on earth. Where God himself will live among us and Jesus will be our light...and he will wipe every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning or crying or pain of any kind any more, for he makes all things new.

Advent is the beginning, a chance to remember what God has done and to look for the rebirth of Christ in our hearts and lives, that these days might be holy days rather than just holidays. Advent calls us to consider our lives and see if there is room of Christ's coming. Are we ready? Is there room in our lives for Christ to be born anew...or are we going to push him to the edges and allow him only to be born in the managers of our souls? Is there room for Christ in our Christmas? Or are we too busy, too worried, too afraid, too caught up in the world's turning that we see the love of God breaking into our world like he did so many years ago. Then shepherds and wise men saw it, and celebrated while the rest of the world went on turning, unaware of the cosmic change that had occurred. Advent invites us to begin a journey, to walk the path to Christmas and beyond it to Good Friday and Easter and Pentecost. To seek the gentle whisper of God's spirit, calling you to renewal and new birth.

I also wanted to share just a moment about us...as a congregation. Advent is a time of new beginnings and this is a good chance to remind ourselves of what we are about. A chance to renew our vision and to consider where God is calling us to go as a church.

As most of you may know, we are a church on a journey. All churches are on journey's really, but ours is obvious. This particular journey began almost 18 years ago with the fire that destroyed the sanctuary building of the church complex.

The fire brought great destruction, but also new birth. For some, this time of change was an opportunity for them to make a change

themselves and find a church closer to their home or heart. For a few, their commitment had been to the building and its preservation. And when that building was gone, they lacked a purpose to hold them to the place of ministry downtown.

But for most, it was clear that the church was not the building and that this fire represented a new beginning, a journey to something new. I would not have guessed that the journey would have taken the many twists that it has or have taken so long to replace the building, but through it all God has led us and supported us and drawn us closer to Him and to each other.

When we began this journey together, there were several guiding principles that we came to together.

First, that this was and is a spiritual journey. The church is more than budgets and property and buildings...it is about the message of hope and grace that we are entrusted with sharing, and our Lord who is alive among us and in us and who calls us to continually follow and grow. We grow in faith and in understanding and we grow closer to Jesus as we follow the path he has laid for us. I remind myself sometimes that if it were easy, where would the faith be? If it were easy, how would God be glorified and honored in its eventual accomplishment? Do not lose heart, God continues to work. And the work we do here in the school and in the community and in each other's lives is the work of the Church.

Second, God has called us to this place...not the school, but the community of the downtown. It is more than just a place we happen to be, but a community that God calls us to love and serve. We are called to be the church here. I remember a few who thought that the church would be better served if we moved out of the downtown...where ministry is easier. And the truth is, the church might have been better

served...but luckily we are not called to server ourselves and do what is easy for us...we are called to serve Christ and those whom he gives us! I remember asking at the time, what message are we sending to the children at Horace Mann or the elderly living in one of the six downtown Senior Housing complexes, or the poor who are in our midst if we move to Silver Creek? In the 70's, many churches moved out of the downtown, and the downtown suffered for it. We are called to be here...this is our mission field and it is a gift from God, as are those who live in it.

Third, that the church must be a place that reflects the downtown community. Where everyone is welcome, and I mean everyone. From folks who are from different ethnic backgrounds to folks who are poor or living on the streets...and everyone in between. We are to reflect the community around us and greater San Jose. This is not just something that happens, but something that we purposefully seek. There is a school of thought about Church Growth that teaches that the best people to reach are people who look like you...who live like you...who have what you have... it is called the homogeneous church growth model. And our church leadership team has read the books and has rejected it because it does not honor the community we live in. This is one of the most diverse places on earth...and our churches must reflect that. This is more than a generality, it is in our congregation's DNA.

That also means that we take seriously Christ's call to love our neighbors. To consider the plight of the needy and the voice of the poor. We seek to be a church that puts it's live where it's mouth is and cares for people. It is important to us that it is more than just words, but deeds to match our proclamation. For people hear what you do louder than what you say...and for too long the Church has not lived out its creeds. One of the biggest and most common complaint (or excuse if you will) used by non believers to reject the church is that the church

does not do anything...it is just words. This is not new. Take 10 minutes to read the Letter of James...where he reminds us that faith without works is dead, and that God honors true religion that cares for the widow and orphan...the needy and those who are alone.

This means that we are seeking to change lives and help people, both with their faith and spiritual growth AND with their lives and real life needs. We do not always do it ourselves, but help other organizations...why reinvent the wheel. It is not about getting credit, but about being faithful and living out the love and compassion of Christ.

And that means that our new building is being built to serve the mission...not the other way around. The building serves the mission, the mission does not service the building. For many churches, the temptation is to consider the building first...our building...rather than the needs of the community or the needy. The building is a place to gather and be the church and a place from which to minister to the community.

We are building the church all the time, the focus is on the people served. People are our mission and ministry.

And so we dedicate significant resources in the building design to reach and serve various groups and people. And the guiding principle is service.

We are building for the future ministry as well as the present. And although we will enjoy the beauty of the sanctuary, we are not focused upon serving ourselves and what we need or want now.

This is always a hard thing, isn't it? It is hard to get ourselves out of the way. We would like certain things...but we must put our desires and likes and dislikes in subordination to serving others...even those who

are not yet here. For example, we must build the building to accommodate a lot of different worship styles...some of which you or I might not appreciate or enjoy very much. But is it not about me or even you...it is about Christ and about his call to serve others even in our worship and our music and our youth program and in our building designs. We are part of it...but we have to look beyond our own desires and likes and see the bigger picture and greater calling.

Advent marks a new beginning...a renewal of purpose. And I am grateful for the chance to be part of this church at this time. For this is God's time...Just like when Jesus was born, as the Bible says "in the fullness of time". It was foretold and predicted and at the right time Christ comes into the world. But he comes in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn.

Advent reminds us that Christ continues to come...and continues to seek a place in our life, in our Christmas, in our church and in our future. Advent has come, Christ is coming...is there a place prepared for him? This is a day of new beginnings.

Christ is born, again, let us rejoice!