

Reflections on the Message of the Advent Season

Colleagues,

Here's something for Advent. It's the Pastor's Piece in the December 2000 newsletter from Mt. Olive Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mukwonago, Wisconsin. That pastor, Steven Kuhl, also wears a couple of other hats. He represents the Greater Milwaukee Synod of the ELCA on the Council of Churches, does some teaching at nearby St. Francis Archdiocesan Seminary, is an active partner in the Lutheran-Episcopal-Roman Catholic dialog group, plus a couple other things. And in his spare time he's the president of The Crossings Community, Inc. I hope you'll be edified as much as I was.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

ADVENT'S ADVENTURE

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On Sunday, December 3, we begin the season of Advent. Whatever all else Advent is about, one thing is certain: Advent is about advent-ure. Adventure is not just an exciting trip, a vacation get-a-way. As Webster's Dictionary defines it, "adventure" is "an undertaking involving danger and unknown risks." What is the danger inherent in Advent's adventure . . . and what is the risk? Answering that question is the key, not only to understanding Advent, but all of life.

Before we can begin to answer that question, however, we must first ask "Whose adventure?" "Whose adventure is Advent about?" In the first instance, certainly not ours. Advent is, first of

all, about the adventure of the Son of Man, the One who will venture into our world as the end-time judge. And that spells danger! Not for the Judge, but the judged, for "the world" engulfed in sin, including you and me.

In the "meantime" (that is, in the here and now), the world lives something like a thief, plundering and pillaging God's good creation . . . perhaps even laughing it up, under the illusory security of darkness (cf. Jn 3:19), marveling at what all it can get away with. (cf. Rom 2:3-6) But such frivolity is not the enduring theme of this world's life. The enduring theme of its life is the "end-time." The end-time is like the time when the police finally arrive – also like thieves in the night (1 Thess 5:2) since their arrival, too, is unexpected by the real thieves. Once on the scene, however, the police quickly dispel the security of the darkness with their searchlights and put an end to all mischief with cuffs and bars. In that day, there is no laughter for the plunderers of God's good creation. There is only, as Jesus often put it, "weeping and the gnashing of teeth." (Mt. 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30)

Although the end-time has not yet come, there are signs of its impending arrival all around us. (Cf. Mt 24; Mk 13, Lk 21) Like the thief who plunders amidst the backdrop of distant sirens, so we too have reminders all around us of the final, impending judgment. That reminder is most vivid in the fact that we live, as St. Paul says, "under law." (cf. Rom 3:19) The law exists in our midst, not as a sign of hope, but as a reminder, in the meantime, that the end-time judgment is coming. Those who would teach that the law is given as a means of escape from sin and judgment are the worst kind of plunderers of God's good creation. They are truly the ones who live under the illusion of darkness. For they underestimate God's word, God's word of judgment to come.

But if that is all that Advent's adventure is about (namely, the future coming of the end-time Judge) then we, the Church, wouldn't even have the nerve to observe it. But we do observe it – and that's because for us Advent is primarily about another adventure. Not one still to come, but one that has already happened, the ramifications of which are still unfolding. Advent is about how this same, future-coming Son of Man has come already . . . “in the meantime” . . . under an alias, the name Jesus, which is code-name for “Savior.” (Mt 1:21)

In Jesus, the Son of Man comes to deliver his verdict ahead of time, at least for those who will receive it. Now that in itself is nothing to cheer about. But what is worthy of cheer is what he adds to the verdict. Surprisingly, he adds not recompense but mercy. In Jesus, the end-time Judge comes not to count sins, but to forgive sins. He comes not as Judge, but as Savior, as the One who can save us from the judgment that is to come. In effect, Advent is about how the Son of Man undermines and negates his own future appointed task as the end-time Judge.

How he makes this way of escape possible is the heart of Advent's adventure, also known as the Christian gospel. Here is the adventure to end all adventures, the riskiest, most dangerous venture of all: the journey that makes possible the reconciliation of God and the world.

The adventure began 2000 years ago in Bethlehem with the simple birth of a child named Jesus. We dare not be fooled by the ordinariness of this beginning. This child is more than meets the eye. He is, as St. Matthew says, Emmanuel, “God with us.” (Mt 1:23) That title was not originally meant to be reassuring at all. Isaiah first used it to refer to the judgment of God that would befall King Ahaz for his wavering ways. (Isa 7:14) However, as Matthew relates it to Jesus, it means not only that he is divine, the Son of God. It means that the God we have come

to know through Jesus – God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19) – has placed the final outcome of the world in Jesus' hands. Because this child is also destined to be the savior of the world, his mission is clear: he must figure out a way to defeat the coming judgment, his own endtime assignment. To this end Jesus dedicates his life and sets out on the adventure of adventures, an adventure filled with danger and risk beyond compare.

The danger and risk of Jesus's adventure is evident throughout his life. For example, while still a child, King Herod ordered his death (Mt 2:16) and, as he went about his ministry of befriending sinners, the Scribes and Pharisees plotted his death. (Mk 3:6, 14:64; Mt 26:4, 65; Jn 11:53) But the most profound danger and threat that Jesus encountered on his great adventure came from God himself. As strange as that might sound, it is true. On the cross, Jesus confronted not only the judgment of his human critics, but the very judgment of God. This was the way he would save the world from the end-time judgment to come.

Think about it. It only stands right that as Jesus goes about befriending sinners he must also assume responsibility for them, for their sin and God's judgment upon them. And this is precisely his plan: to assume and conquer their sin and God's judgment. It's not that Jesus was guilty in himself. Rather, it is as Paul says: "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Co 5:21). The result is that God was so impressed that he raised Jesus from the dead, effectively making him the pivotal point in history. As we believe in him so we have from him. Jesus as savior, not the anonymous end-time Judge, now becomes the enduring theme in life, at least for those who receive him in the mean-time through faith.

Therefore, for us, Advent is an adventure in faith. It is a

matter of trusting in the mean-time that the end-time has been secured by Christ. What this means practically is that we live a life of repentance and forgiveness. No longer worried about the end-time judgment we through faith can entertain that judgment now, already . . . and do so with Jesus' added benefit: resurrection hope, a new lease on life, a new life dedicated, not to the plundering and pillaging of God's good creation, but to the care and redemption of all that he has made.

Peace be with you on your Advent adventure,
Pastor Steve