

The Once & Future Church

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC, on December 3, 2017

http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Advent/BAdv1_RCL.html

The days can be long, but the years are short, a wise person once told me. They were specifically talking about parenting, I believe. There was likely a whole lot of chaos going on around me. But the saying holds true in so many aspects of life, and the life of parish, the life of a community centered around the work and teachings of Jesus Christ is no different.

Christians around the world today mark the First Sunday of Advent, which is the first Sunday of a new year for the church. Each year, the Gospel reading on this first Sunday of Advent is less than cheerful. “Gospel” means really, really, really great, amazing, awesome news. It’s hard to find really, really, really great, amazing awesome news in a passage that begins by Jesus saying, “In those days, after that suffering...” It’s not the shiny, happy, maybe-feisty Jesus we all prefer, the one who is sticking to his fellow Pharisees and healing those on the margins and proving his doubters wrong. It’s a dark and brooding Jesus who is telling his followers to stay awake because they don’t know when that suffering will begin and what it will entail, but stay sharp, stay ready, because the world will have been turned right-side-up when that happens.

It was 52 Sundays ago today that we held the 2016 edition of the Annual Meeting of Christ Church. Fifty-**three** Sundays since we celebrated the First Sunday of Advent in 2016. In that amount of time, Christ Church has baked untold numbers of cookies for Cookie Walk, sold over 2,000 pumpkins for Pumpkin Patch, made hundreds of hours of pastoral visits to those in need, provided for and mentored children of prisoners, given to Farm Workers, refugees, and those in our community who face food instability each day. We launched two new faith-formation initiatives and filled a freezer (several times over) for those who may need a meal when they are having a hard time. Christ Church has sent young and old alike to serve those outside of Craven County who need to see and hear the Good News of God in Christ, and the financial faithfulness of people at Christ Church made it possible for the Vestry to address some of the infrastructure needs of this beautiful and historic place.

The days are long, but the years are short. Not one single things that I just mentioned occurred because of any one person, nor did it happen overnight. And for those things that began in the past 52 weeks, I doubt the seed of idea was planted recently. I’ve sometimes thought I’d like to place a mirror over the arches up above here. The mirror would be angled as such so that everyone in the pews could see each other

and most importantly, you could see yourself. It would run wall to wall, and it would have emblazoned on it: **These are the ministers of Christ Church.**

Because the work that happens here is all part of turning the world right-side-up. We are far from perfect (don't think that I'm going to toot our horn too much), but we are one little corner of the Kingdom of God helping to realize the mission and vision of God for all humanity to be reconciled to its Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. This week, I had the honor of delivering all of the items brought to last Sunday's Baby Shower for Jesus. The staff at the Coastal Women's Shelter couldn't believe that one church would provide this much stuff. (Their conference room table was **fully covered** with children's pajamas, baby soap, juice boxes, diapers, and other items someone might need if they suddenly had to leave their house). "Do you know how many people this will help and in how many ways?" one of them said to me. As I was opening my mouth to say, "I don't know," she replied emphatically "Alot! That's how many!"

I've never had the opportunity to speak any of the people who decided that the Gospel reading on the First Sunday of Advent would always be so filled with mystery and doom and gloom, but I know that there is good reason for it. The reason is that we are being reminded of Jesus' return. We are not marking the days leading up to his first incarnation, but his second. In other words, Advent is about preparing for the nativity of Jesus only if that preparation includes a renewed effort by his followers to **be** his message of love and reconciliation to a world that so desperately needs it. It's not about making sure our shopping list is complete, but about making sure the world is ready to welcome the King of Kings and the Prince of Peace.

This effort is not without its challenges. Even here in the Bible belt, the mention of God or Church or Jesus can be met with a skeptical side-eye. Christians of all stripes and flavors carry out their "family" squabbles in the public view and drive believers and would-be believers away. Christians are seen defending abusers and perpetrators, leaving the victims wondering for good reason why the Church has abandoned them. Sports fields seem a more attractive alternative for busy families.

The days are long, the years are short, and what is the Church to do? The most cursory of searches on the Interwebs reveal enough books to fill these pews with answers of what churches should do to remind the world of our presence and our importance. Few, if any, go to the heart of the question which is **not** *what* would Jesus do, but **WHY** did Jesus do it? And if we are supposed to be followers of Jesus, being reminded of his first appearance and preparing for his second, why aren't we doing more of it? Jesus loved people unconditionally, offered healing, refuge, and hope. He did it while sitting on a hillside and while walking down the street. His harshest words were saved for those times he was in a house of worship. The irony of **that** should not be lost on us 2,000 years later.

Throughout history, the Church has been her strongest, not when Christians grappled for power and fame, but when Christians discerned the heart of God for God's creation.

The Church has been her best not when we basked in the glory of our structures but when she actively invited those on the margins of society to be a part of her work and mission.

The Church has been her most faithful when her people have known themselves as ministers of the Gospel, having the humbling opportunity to be the hands, feet, and voice of Christ in this world.

Those are the times when the Church has gotten it right. And in so many ways, that's what we do here. Over the next 52 weeks, what will ***you*** and I do as ministers of Christ Church to turn the world right-side-up?

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