

Two weekends ago in the middle of the Thanksgiving travel rush, a harried airline passenger, noting some special decorations at the check-in desk asked, “Why is there mistletoe hanging over the baggage counter?” The clerk replied with a sly grimace, “It’s so you can kiss your luggage good-bye.”

Advent is about losing and finding - comings and goings – about saying goodbye to some things and hello to some other things. Advent, our celebration of the coming of Christ among us is peculiar good news, but it also casts a shadow, declaring, as it does that the world, as we have known it, has an end and that there will be a whole new world yet to come, a world renewed and restored reached through our encounter with Jesus, God in the flesh. This message echoes in every Advent hymn and Christmas carol - God is working a revolution in our midst, in our lives, and in the life of the world – A New World is coming!

J. B. Phillips scholar and Bible translator put it very well when he wrote this: “We shall be celebrating no beautiful myth, no lovely piece of traditional folklore, but a solemn fact. God has been here once historically, but, as millions will testify, he will come again with the same silence and the same devastating humility into any human heart ready to receive him.”

Let us recall and welcome the Good News that God’s entrance into our lives occurs at God’s initiative. Christ arrives in our midst not as a reward for detailed preparations, but the result of divine compassion. God comes to us whether or not we have made ready for the divine presence. Christ comes and claims us whether or not we have decorated for the event. God comes amid darkness and despair as readily as amid light and happiness. The advent of the Christ of God, in the manger and in glory is an expression of God’s grace. So please be free – be free from any lingering deception that you might recognize in yourself: The reality of Christmas does not depend upon you!! It is not all about you!! The advent of Jesus reveals God’s incredible love for all people, whatever their life situations or social conditions.

So if you have been able to choose gifts, tie ribbons, write cards, hang wreaths, adorn trees, and display lights to celebrate Christ’s birth or if you plan such decorations, great! But, if your days are devoid of joy and your home stark and sparse – if your life seems blighted with pain rather than blessed with joy – no matter. Christ is and will come to you. Jesus and all God’s hope will arrive in your life.

God you see, isn’t partial to finery nor impressed by extravagance. God’s grace ignores prerequisites. God joined our world undocumented out-of-wedlock in a smelly cattle stall, somewhere down a back alley, in a little-known village, without even a Dairy Queen! God arrives where no lights blink and no flags fly, in hospital wards as well as in cathedrals, among mourners as well as amid carolers. God comes where everything seems to be ending as well as where everything appears to be beginning. God comes in the Labor Ward and Hospice room, to the nursery and the mortuary! The coming of our Lord is God’s response to our needs, not God’s reaction to our decorations. The Christ who has come will come. Christ will come among us, so let us open our hearts and make our Lord and Savior most welcome.

Our Malachi text sounds harsh: God will come as strong lye to scour away sin, as a refining fire to purify silver and gold. Such words are picked up and echoed by John the Baptist as he calls us to a complete transformation of body, mind and soul. Those who first heard John’s call were a lot like us,

they too had convinced themselves that their goal in life was to shoot for the top, they aspired to do well in life, to provide for their loved ones, to get ahead, to win positions of power and influence, to be a somebody. John appearing on the scene, wading into the muddy waters of the Jordan, came challenging such assumptions, speaking a message of repentance a Greek word which means “to change your mind” “to change your way of thinking.”

My friends, today, John, still stands waist-deep in the mud of the river of repentance and reaches out looking us in the eye and asking, “Will you decide now to live so that God is at the top? Will your journey through life always remembering that you are called to love and follow God?” Still John declares the challenging and painful truth that real faith is about living right in the real world!

“Get ready,” John says. “Tear down every obstacle between you and God – or God will tear it down. Fill in every ditch between you and God – or God will fill it in. Straighten the blind curves in your attitude and the twisting ways in your behavior toward others – or God will straighten you out. Get to work smoothing God’s way home, for God is surely coming home to live in you!” This is surely still God’s message to us today: “Repent! Change your thinking... and your living! Get ready! God is on the way! God wants you to have forward motion in your life of faith, moving in the correct direction, making progress towards God.”

Bubba and Billy Joe are walking down the street, and they see a sign on a store which reads, "Suits \$5.00 each, shirts \$2.00 each, trousers \$2.50 each. Bubba says to his pal, "Billy Joe, Look here! We could buy a whole gob of these, take 'em back to Montgomery, sell 'em to our friends, and make a fortune. Just let me do the talkin' 'cause if they hear your accent, they might think we're ignorant, and not wanna sell that stuff to us. Now, I'll talk in a New York accent so's they don't know we is from Alabama." They go in and Bubba says with his best fake NY accent, "I'll take 50 of them suits at \$5.00 each, 100 of them there shirts at \$2.00 each, 50 pairs of them there trousers at \$2.50 each. I'll back up my pickup and." "The owner of the shop interrupts, "Ya'll from Alabama, ain't ya?" "Well...yeah," says a surprised Bubba... "How come you knowed that?" "Because, this is a drycleaners!"

In the pickup truck of our lives we will be able to recognize times in our spiritual journey, in our life of faith, to and with God, when we have been in Park, in Reverse, in Neutral or in Drive. Advent is a great opportunity to admit to ourselves, to one another and to God exactly where we are currently in our journey of faith. So, where are you currently in your spiritual journey? In your journey to and with God, are you in Park or Reverse or Neutral or Drive?

Are you in Park? Going nowhere at all? Stuck? Not moving? Not even sure you want to face the next leg of the journey? Waiting for someone to encourage you to crank the ignition, release the brake and get in gear? Hoping someone will share the driving with you or help you by reading the map and assisting with the directions?

Are you in Reverse? Moving away from God? Allowing yourself to fall into habits that distract you from hearing and heeding God’s call on your life? Becoming more distant from God because of some obstacle? Longing for someone to guide you past the bumps in the road, to assure you that you are not alone, to remind you of hope?

Are you in Neutral? Spinning your gears, using some energy but having no traction? Lacking forward momentum, the gas tank is emptying but all you see is the same old view you have been seeing for too long already? If only someone could open the map at the correct page or inspire you to move ahead? If only someone would take your hand in theirs and help you get in gear again?

Are you in Drive? You have a plan, you know where you are going and you know how to get there and even if you are not fully sure of the route you are prepared to trust the One who has always led you? Aware of others around you on the road you drive responsibly, with regard to the conditions and the rules of the road?

This congregation of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church is a big ol' Driving School – we have drivers at every stage of the journey, and at one time or another all of us have been in Park, in Reverse, in Neutral, in Drive – and today some of us are in Park, some in Reverse, some in Neutral and some in Drive. As such we have such a deep responsibility to and for each other, to be ready to assist one another, to teach, to encourage, to nurture, to correct, to journey together on this journey to and with God.

Advent is the season of waiting, of expectation, of hoping, of remembering that God is not finished. God is not finished with you! You may be in Park, Reverse, Neutral or Drive – God is not finished with you! God is not finished with us. God is not finished with the church. God is not finished with the world. God will bring to completion all that has begun. God has places for you to move ahead, to move closer, to move forward in your journey of faith, to and with God. In Advent we wait with grateful hope, to repent, to change our way of thinking and living. So we can welcome and receive God and respond to God. The unfinished work that is our life together holds great promise. What God is doing in us is a clue to what God is about to do.

So help us God, to help each other along this road - having been encountered by our Lord Jesus Christ we are forever changed and are now committed to a new way of life, invited to partner one another, to allowing the life of God to be seen and shared in God's world through us. So help us God - to be able to sense what we need from one another that all of us might make this journey together, so help us God. Amen.