December 2, 2012
First Sunday in Advent

EASY TO MISS

December already. Advent: 2012 A.D. Fascinating. We will never see November of 2012 ever again. Well, maybe in our memories. Perhaps we had experiences and learned things we will not soon forget. But we cannot relive November. And if we try, we will miss December. Such things are obvious, yet I have a hard time getting used to them. So what is the business at hand, now that it is Advent of 2012?

So many different answers are being given to this question. So many people, and all of us are giving our own answers to who we are, what we care about, and what we are doing here. Yet pockets of us do give similar answers in principle, because of what we have come to believe, and because we have been drawn into a covenant community with each other. That does not make us identical, but it does unite us in some very important ways.

What is our business here? “To live good moral and ethical lives,” some have said. Well, I don’t know anybody in The New Church who thinks that is a bad idea. I certainly do appreciate it when I run into someone who tries to live a good moral and ethical life. Especially so if we have any business dealings with each other. Still, that is hardly enough to get anybody converted to Christianity.

Others would say that it is our business “to help, insofar as we are able, those less fortunate than ourselves.” No time today to discuss who is less fortunate, or on what basis, or how we try to help them. In any case, that is far from the central meaning of the Christian Faith. Deeds of mercy and caring spill over as by-products of our encounter with Jesus, but they are not even close to the center or core of our faith.

Jesus came proclaiming new lives for old. That is an altogether different category – a different dimension of message and invitation. We cannot have the new life without turning in the old one. We cannot put new wine into old wineskins, He said.

This offer is never about some far-off future. His offer is always for the here and now: light where there was darkness; faith where there was fear; hope where there was despair; meaning and purpose where, before, things seemed to be run by random choice or, worse, by some evil force. Have we forgotten what it was like to see our own lives laced with
greed and malice; with the lust for power; with the compulsive race for pleasure or recognition that turns even beautiful things into something sick and wrong? Do we remember Stalin? Hitler? For every saint or hero we truly honor, can we not name others so crass and cruel that it is difficult to imagine that they are really human? What do they think they will accomplish? And have you never been heartsick to recognize in yourself at least some of the seeds of what you see in them?

I am often amazed at the *casualness* with which some people approach the New Life in Christ Jesus. It’s almost as if they have no true concern about which side they are on. Or maybe worse, it’s as if they have not realized that there are life-and-death issues going on all around us. Life is about more than who we marry, what we eat, how much money we make, or how we spend Friday night.

But we are only at the beginning of Advent, and I seem to be jumping too quickly into what Advent is really about. Let’s pretend a little longer that it is all very casual and ordinary, that we have all the time in the world, and that we are each in charge of when time will run out for us.

You know, “advent” is an interesting word. It refers to a period of time. Even more, it refers to a process that takes place between the “departure” and the “arrival.” Advent means *the coming*. There is an advent before every event.

I can remember as a little boy having a lot of trouble with this concept. It was hard for me to understand that we could leave our house with every intention of being somewhere else, and still take a long, long time to get there. It was especially hard not to keep asking, “Are we almost there, Daddy?” “No. Not for a long time yet. Be patient. Stop asking me every three minutes.”

It was even harder for me to realize that the same thing was true of people who were coming to visit us. Such visits were always preceded by certain preparations in which all of us took part: mowing the lawn, sweeping the walks, vacuuming, cooking, and so on. I can remember the feeling of panic when someone would mention, “Well, they are on their way now,” and my jobs were only half finished! A half-finished job was no joke, in my childhood. Then Mother would say, “It’s okay. They won’t be here for another three hours.” How was that possible?! They were on the way, but they wouldn’t arrive for three more hours? Something must be really wrong with them. (Nobody had helped me to understand yet
that there really is something very wrong with us: we are finite creatures and terribly limited by time and space.

In any case, things do not just happen in this world willy-nilly, instantaneously, or without preparation. For every EVENT, there is an ADVENT. Plans must be made. Preparations must be carried out. We must get ready for the event, or the arrival spells chaos, and sometimes disaster. Most often, if we do not get ready to perceive and receive, the event itself passes us by. We may hear the noise and see the activity, and maybe even be right in the middle of where it is all happening, but the event itself will pass us by.

I never knew any of my grandparents. One grandmother came for a visit once. I didn’t know at the time that it would only be once. I also didn’t understand what “grandmother” meant. She stayed for several days, I’m told, but I never knew her. I cannot remember her voice, her face, or a single thing she ever said. I missed it – the event passed me by.

Do we miss most things, or do we perceive and receive most of what is really happening? Which is the exception and which is the rule? So much goes on all around us, and much of the time we seem only partially awake. Even the great events are easy to miss. All through history, the great events have been missed by all but a handful of people. We have to read history books to find out which events were really important. Only a few perceive or receive what is going on at the time. Only a few know the secret of Advent: there must be preparation, awareness, a readiness to receive – or it passes us by.

Officially, Advent is four weeks to get ready to perceive and receive Christmas – the coming of the Messiah: the coming of the Son of God. On reflection, we realize that God’s preparations took longer – millions of years. We do not identify very easily until it gets to things we understand. But we realize now that God was making Christmas preparations when he started talking with Abraham four thousand years ago. God was already hanging lights with Jacob and Joseph. God was playing special Christmas music with Moses and David. God was wrapping presents with Isaiah and Jeremiah and whoever in the world wrote Jonah. For two thousand years ahead of time, God was sending Christmas cards about this coming. For at least seven hundred years, people talked about getting ready, about how eager they were, and about the Great Day – the Day of the Messiah’s coming. And they kept praying: “Are we almost there, Daddy?”
You know what happened. When it came, most folk missed it, even those who were there and watching. They thought it would be automatic. They thought it would be easy for them to turn and catch the Messiah’s coming whenever it came. They had not made the necessary preparations—the ones on the inside. And the truth is, as with all things high and holy, it is easy to miss.

There are always so many other things going on. Pictures to take, presents to buy, money to make, people to see, things to do. Time goes by and the lamps burn low, and we get to thinking that it won’t happen in such a humdrum time, or anywhere close to us. Then there is a strange light from the sky, and a flurry of a different kind of excitement. But we are in the middle of tasks and plans of our own. We scurry and hurry to finish up what we are doing; after all, it must be done. Then we turn to see what the strange new light was. But by that time all is quiet again, except for the normal noises of the way of the world. The Messiah comes to tell us that the Holy Spirit is always available to us—always coming to people in all ages and places. Christmas comes to tell us of Emmanuel: “God with us.” Only, we have to see it embodied to believe it. And the problem is, it is easy to miss. We even find it hard to discern. Of all the things we are involved with, which are the distractions?

The Gospel of John does not understand any of this in terms of four weeks, or even four thousand years. It just nods its head quietly and says, “In the beginning was the Word.” The idea, the thought-pattern, the plan of God was from the beginning: it was always in the mind of God—always God’s intention. You can go all Looney Tunes, if you like that sort of thing, and claim deep mysteries of Trinitarian constructs—until nobody has the faintest notion of what they (or anybody else) are talking about. But logos is air. God thinks before God acts, unlike some of God’s creatures. God’s mind was in the beginning with God, of course. And God’s intentions for creation—God’s plans for us—were always part of the plan. Therefore, in the end, God will bring it to completion. John thinks in Greek constructs. Earth, air, fire, and water are the realities of life. Air (logos) is the design, and earth (creation) follows. God does not create first and then think about it afterward. Some of you would argue with that, as you argue with everything. Creativity, you say, is not always from mere intellect. But who told you that the Logos of God was confined to mere intellect? The Logos—the Word—is far more than intellect. It is the full spectrum of awareness, of being sentient. All feeling, caring, emotion, passion, intention, logic, principle, pattern, and law are integrated in the Logos—in the Word.
At least that would have been John’s perspective. And from John’s perspective: Coming or going, Jesus is at the center of it. Jesus is the event that makes it real for us – that breaks us into LIFE. The Word became flesh: it was embodied – it was made real so we could see it. Even so, it is easy to miss.

Many humans, especially those in western cultures, will reenact the drama of Christmas again this year. That is, the celebration will come and go, but most folk will miss it. Yet God does not call it off. God enters the world with the same purpose that was from the beginning. God does not alter the purpose or change the plan according to how many people comprehend it or vote for it. We are invited to notice if we will, to understand if we want to, to participate if we are willing. God’s Son comes into the world, and most folk go on about their business. Yet God goes on about God’s business too: the redemption of Life – a Savior, for those who will perceive and receive Him.

I have been in conversations about “relevance” for a lot of years now. “Why waste time or energy on the church, when it’s clear that we live in a post-Christian era? The church won’t even be around a few years from now.” That was accepted wisdom back in the ’60s. Time and time again, we have watched the Christian Faith outlast what people thought was relevant. God’s Son coming into the world and inviting us into a different WAY of Life – that is going to lose its luster, go out of date, become old hat? Most of us don’t think so, but some humans will always be thinking so. Frank Weiskel, my New England mentor, would sometimes comment: “He who marries the spirit of this age, will find himself all alone in the age to come.”

John believed in Christmas. Not the kind we celebrate; that had not been invented yet. John believed that God’s Son had come into the world – that God had revealed God’s true purpose and true nature in Jesus Christ. By that faith, John proclaimed his belief in Life’s potential. In Jesus of Nazareth, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And “Those who believe in Him are given the power to become children of God.” For John, Life’s potential had jumped clear off the map. Suddenly it was unlimited; there was no ceiling. The love and power of God were so great that no matter how much you believed, you could not overreach God’s greatness. In one sense, you could believe as much as you were able to grasp and it would be true for you, because your mind could not exceed God’s greatness.
It is as if God gave us a blank check and said, “Write in the highest amount you can honestly dare to believe is possible.” Then God made good on whatever we each wrote in. Only, people kept writing in such paltry amounts. They kept settling for such meager lives that it wasn’t any fun for God. God, after all, is a Great Giver! It was irritating and insulting how little most people wanted from God. So down through the ages, God kept needling people: “Come on, add a few zeros on the end of it!” A few folk added one or two, and God made payment: You want the fleece wet, or dry? Okay. You want a code to live by? Okay. You want the Promised Land? Okay. You want out of the belly of the great fish and back on dry land? Okay. Even so, most folk were so afraid, they couldn’t even hang on to what had already been given, never mind expecting more. And always God waits for the smile of understanding to light our faces, but it rarely comes.

Finally, God turned to his Son and said, “We are never going to get anywhere at this rate. Somebody is going to have to go down there and show those people how to make the mark for infinity.” There was a nod ... and Advent began.

How much life do we have to carry in order to survive? How much soul can we leave lying dormant and still get by? It is easy to miss, but that misses the point. How much are we worthy to receive? How much do we deserve to put down on that blank check? It is easy to miss, but that completely misses the point! How much are we worth to the people around us? How much can we accomplish for their benefit? Should that not govern the amount we can write in? That is what most folk – even most of us – still believe, even though we don’t often admit it outright. But it still completely misses the point of His coming.

What a paltry, cheap, and stingy little festival we have turned Christmas into, at least in comparison to what really happened. It is no good just hearing words about Infinite Life or Infinite Love or Infinite Joy. We have to put it back up to God: make some sign that we have heard and want to respond; take some steps to show that we dare to believe what God has done and wants to go on doing for us. Get your pen out and start adding zeros. If we are not playing games, God will make payment on whatever we write on that blank check of LIFE – because that is the kind of God that God is.

Somebody told us that Christmas is for children? Fine. Then let’s start acting like children – God’s children. And while we’re on the subject: What kind of stingy, inept, uncaring Heavenly Father do we think we have?
I cannot say it as well as John did, but maybe we can still think some more about what John was trying to tell us. Shall we try?

Even before our world was made, God had already decided what the meaning and purpose of creation would be. The secret of the goal and completion of life was with God, because the secret was God: the awareness of God; being with God; the experience of God – life with God.

Everything that was ever created was made with this purpose in mind. And nothing exists which is by nature opposed to this purpose. Everything in life, if rightly understood and rightly used, will contribute to the revealing and the bringing of the meaning God has for us.

Yet the goal itself is still unfulfilled in our world. Therefore, its proclamation is like a great beacon – a Light shining in the darkness.

A ray of this very Light – a person in whom the meaning was fulfilled – was coming into the world. Even though He was what the people of the world were created to be like, most people thought Him weird and hard to get along with. They did not recognize in Him their true destiny. Even though He knew and illustrated the secret they were all looking for and longing for, they could not believe it was actually possible, and so they turned on him, rejected Him, murdered Him.

But a few there were who looked more closely, and saw the deep desire of their own souls answered in this man and the life He lived. To those few – and to all those who will ever look more closely and believe what they see – He gives power to become what they are created and intended to be: children of Light – children of God.

It was for this very reason and purpose – this WAY of Life which God had intended from the beginning – that the pattern took shape and form and became a man, and lived among us.

No one has ever seen God, and all the rules and laws and efforts we make do not help us to approach the true design that God has for us. But Jesus Christ has revealed it to us. He has opened the WAY and made it available to us.
“Are we almost there, Daddy?” That was old Simeon’s question, and Anna’s. That was the question of the wise men, and of John the Baptist. Maybe some of us have that same question too. Only, now we know the answer, if we will receive it: “YES! The time is here. It is now happening in your realm, and before your very eyes.” But it is easy to miss. And most of the world keeps going right on by.

What do we really want? Do we know yet? Do we dare yet to believe that God wants LIFE for us, and will come through with as much of it as we can genuinely ask for – with as much as we are willing to receive? What do we actually expect to receive from God today? Will we dare to take it down out of the realms of religious theory and clarify, in God’s presence, what it is that we really want?

“New lives for old!” That is what God offers, and what God is always putting on the altar for us. There is no ceiling and no limit to it. It is Advent. He is coming – coming to teach us how to make the mark for infinity.