

Advent 4 2020 – Festival of Lessons and Carols

I want to begin with a word of gratitude to our musicians, and our readers.
And to Cathy, Phillip, Connie, Judi who decorated the church so beautifully.
And to all of you who came to worship this morning.

Events like this are more important than we might realize.

The God who created the universe, the Source and Sustainer of all life,
The God who called Abraham and initiated the Covenant,
who gave the Law & designed the Tabernacle, also gave His people Festivals.
These were times of celebration anchored
to the seasons of the earth, and
to significant events in our salvation history.

God knew we needed fixed reference points and
frequent physical reminders of His promises and his presence.

We also need reminders of who we are.
Reminders not in words but in actions.
“This is who we are. This is what we do.” With our bodies.
“This is what we eat what we wear, what we sing and say.”
“The is how we decorate our space.”

And clearly we cannot do these things alone. We need each other.

It can be a pageant or a parade involving thousands,
or something as small as a potluck dinner or a cup of coffee in a parish hall.

But these things matter.
When we stop doing the things that sustain our corporate identity we will get
lost and confused.
These are the things that sustain us in difficult times.

This time last year we had no idea what was coming in March.

We did not know there would be a profound alteration, not only of behavior,
but of our relationships, and, I dare say, even our sense of who we are.

It will be a long time before we know the full extent of our losses.

Do you remember the days when we thought we would “flatten the curve” in a couple of weeks and things would return quickly to the way they were?

I still hear some people talking as though things will get back to “normal.”
But not with as much confidence.

Or sometimes with exaggerated confidence.

We say we can’t wait for 2020 to be over, as if we know 2021 will be better.
Perhaps it will be. Or perhaps not.
No one saw this coming. What are we not seeing now?

This crisis is a reminder that we don’t know the future.

Of course, that isn’t exactly news.

We’ve always known that, but we sensed we were getting better at predicting, and we had made peace with a certain degree of uncertainty.
We had ways of anticipating market cycles, hedging our bets, diversifying our portfolios, taking precautions, and preparing for the unexpected, up to a point.

Now we feel that the range of things that could happen has outgrown our ability to predict, prevent, and respond smoothly.

It has become difficult to predict even our own responses, much less the responses of others.

There are too many variables to manage.

Some would say, “No, you just need to upgrade your algorithm to handle a little more complexity.”

“You need to prepare for a wider variety of scenarios.”

“But it’s all still manageable.”

Perhaps so.

Some say the solution is more centralized control.

The crises of 2020 have also forced us to reconsider our values, convictions, and loyalties: What and who really matter to us?

We have had to make decisions—difficult decisions with huge implications.

Who we will trust, and what we will do?

We may not realize it consciously, but behind those questions lie our view of God and of ourselves.

Everything we do, say, and feel is an answer to these fundamental questions:
Who are we, who are our people?
Who is our God, what is He like?

Did you know that these are Advent questions?

In Advent we are not just looking forward to Christmas.
We are affirming something that fewer and fewer people still believe:

- 1) That we are the beloved creation of God.
- 2) That He is moving all things toward a great salvation.

Our lessons today—if we choose to accept them as anything more than ancient religious artifacts--remind us that we are part of a Great Story.

They remind us that this Story is the most significant thing about us and about every person you know, every friend, every member of your family, every stranger.

If this Great Story is true, then nothing else really matters.
If it is false, then nothing matters at all.

If there is no loving Creator and no ultimate redemption, life is meaningless.
All our thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams are nothing but chemical secretions creating an illusion of consciousness and choice.

We are here this morning, creating this Festival together.
We read these Scriptures and sing these songs because part of us still believes there is a God who created us to love and be loved by Him.

We know that we have collectively and individually all gone astray from Him.
But He has not left us to our fate.
He has come to seek and to save us.
And He is saving us even now, as much as we will let Him.

As John says: “To as many as receive Him, to them He gives power to become Sons and Daughters of God.”

We are here today because at least part of us still believes there is only one means of salvation for all humanity.

And we all share one ultimate destiny.

All roads lead to Christ.

Hear these marvelous words of St Paul to the Colossians.

He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

There is coming a time when all things, St. Paul tells us, will be brought together in Christ.

There will come a time when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ alone is Lord.

Some will confess with delight and gratitude,
Some with resentment and hatred.

I love the way CS Lewis depicts this scene in *The Last Battle*:

The creatures came rushing on, their eyes brighter and brighter as they drew nearer and nearer. But as they came right up to Aslan one or other of two things happened to each of them. They all looked straight in his face; I don't think they had any choice about that. And when some looked, the expression of their faces changed terribly — it was fear and hatred: ... And all the creatures who looked at Aslan in that way swerved to their right, his left, and disappeared into his huge black shadow ... I don't know what became of them.

But the others looked in the face of Aslan and loved him, though some of them were very frightened at the same time. And all these came in at the Door, in on Aslan's right. There were some strange specimens among them. Eustace even

recognised one of those very Dwarfs who had helped to shoot the Horses. But he had no time to wonder about that sort of thing (and anyway it was no business of his) for a great joy put everything else out of his head. Among the happy creatures who now came crowding round Tirian and his friends were all those whom they had thought dead. There was Roonwit the Centaur and Jewel the Unicorn, and the good Boar and the good Bear and Farsight the Eagle, and the dear Dogs and the Horses, and Poggin the Dwarf.

On that Great Day everything will be defined in relation to Christ.

But even now, whether we know or not, accept it or not, whether we like it or not, everything already exists in relation to Christ.

These days we are obsessed with categorizing ourselves: by sex, race, ethnicity, income level, who are the oppressed and who are the oppressors.

But ultimately there are only two significant categories of human existence, those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ.

Christ's very existence creates this duality without saying a word.

We all live in reference to Him, every moment of every day.

The most significant thing about us, and every person we meet, is our relationship to Jesus Christ.

- For those who are in Christ, all other distinctions either become irrelevant or find their rightful place.
- For those who are not in Christ every imaginable difference looms large and menacing.

For the last 10 months, most of us have been living much of our lives in reference to a combination of two things: the virus and the election.

These two things have dominated our thoughts, our conversations, our emotions, and our behavior.

Think of how much time and energy and money – is it trillions yet? – we have devoted to these two things, directly and indirectly, since March.

Think of the impact these things have had on our relationships.

Families have fractured over these things.

And consider the future.

How will our choices in the last 10 months determine the next 10 years?

I see now how much I have allowed my approach to the ministry of St. Peter's has been influenced by the virus.

It has taken over my consciousness, too, and become my point of reference.

Yet what is all of this compared to the ultimate reality of Jesus Christ?

Some say all of this points toward the end of the world.

I don't know if we are in the Last Days, but I know I am in my last days.

And so are you. Our meter started ticking the moment we were born.

Our gospel lesson points us to Jesus as both the agent of Creation and New Creation.

John uses Genesis language when he says:

In the beginning was the word and word was with God and the word was God

The same was in the beginning with God

All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made.

In Him was life and that life was the light of men.

There is one source of life: Jesus Christ, the eternally begotten incarnate Word.

I want Him and Him alone to be my point of reference.

I want Him to be the object of my thoughts, my conversation, my time, my internet consumption, my actions, my finances.

What are you looking forward to most this Christmas, and in the year ahead?

What are you most excited about? An effective vaccine? A return to normal? Survival?

Or maybe something better?

How about a complete reorientation of everything around Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last.

If Jesus is who we say He is, then nothing else matters.

If He is not, then nothing matters at all.