

ADVENT IV
ST. CHRISTOPHER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
PENSACOLA, FLORIDA
DECEMBER 21, 2014

*“O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear –“
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen*

Come, Emmanuel. Come “God with us.” Come soon. Come now!
We Christians have prayed and sung those words for two thousand years.
And our Jewish cousins have prayed and waited even longer for the Son of God to appear.

That is our plea, our hope, and our expectation.
The message of the prophets and the promise of the angels -
that we will be ransomed from our captivity –
Released from our enslavement in its many forms –
Freed from death and freed from sin.
Set free in the Promised Land of God’s Kingdom.
That is the beginning and the end of our Christmas wish list.
Way down deep in our heart of hearts, it is the Christmas present we all desire.
Come in your glory, Lord Jesus, we pray.
Help us to be ready for your return, and then come -
Come and heal us. Come and bless us. Come and set us free.

That is the reason for the season – this season named “Coming” – or in Latin
“Advent”
-the time the Church has set aside each year for us to prepare –
to be still -
to repent and to open our hearts and our lives to the One who has come and who
will come again -
to prepare to give gifts and to prepare to receive them -
as we hear again the ancient prophets of Israel preparing us -
calling as always for amendment of life and for faithful waiting and watching.

Waiting - for the gifts of God's redeeming love and salvation. Watching - for signs of God's Kingdom and our place in it.

Advent - a time to be stirred again by John the Baptizer - as he prepares the way of the Lord - the Messiah -

The one who will fulfill those ancient prophecies, and **be** that promised, longed for gift of love and new life.

Advent - a time to remember God's greatest gift - the gift of his Son, whose unlikely and problematic coming we hear about in our gospel lesson on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent.

Mary, the young, unmarried handmaid of the Lord, as she describes herself. This faithful servant of God.

Mary, who prepared her heart for the transcendent joy and the unspeakable sorrow that she would know as mother of this Son, soon to be safe for a time in her womb.

"Theotokos" the Greek Church calls her, the "God bearer."

We hear this morning of the visit of the angle Gabriel to Mary - the stunning, amazing, wonderful news that he delivers as God's messenger.

The proclamation to Mary and to us that with God nothing is impossible.

Nothing!

Advent is an exciting and complex time, rich with history and emotion.

But most of all, Advent can and should be **our** time - our time of preparation - corporate and private -

the time for each of us to prepare **our** heart and **our** life to receive God's wondrous gift of Emmanuel - "God with us."

The one born to be our savior, and the one promised to return when the time is fulfilled

Perhaps today - perhaps tomorrow -

Whenever the time is fulfilled for Christ to return to be our judge.

So - are we ready - you and I? Is the time fulfilled for us?

Or another way we ask this is, "have you gotten the Christmas spirit?"

The real, the true Christmas spirit of love.

Are you asking yourself, "Will it happen for me this year?"

I know I am. I always ask it.

Will Christmas come for me, come for you - really, really come?

Will it happen?

"Please, dear God, please let it happen!" we pray.

In the midst of the frantic bustle that we often allow our Christmas to become,

In the blur that our lives too often are - Christmas season or not.

Perhaps in the depths of our loneliness or despair -

with old sorrows or new pains,
 or simply the daily grind,
 what miracle will allow God and his peace and his love to come to us again,
 or once, or ever?

Can we, will we, prepare a place for the Holy Spirit of Christmas to dwell within us?
 It takes nothing less than the grace of God, and the power of that Holy Spirit, and our
 willing participation, just as it did for Mary.

We can pray and serve and give, and then we must wait, expectantly and patiently
 and faithfully and hopefully.

So is it too late for us this year?

Is it ever, ever too late?

Charles Dickens, perhaps the greatest English writer of the 19th C., a devout Church
 of England Christian, and the man whose stories probably have done more to
 influence how the Western World celebrates Christmas than all the church councils
 and liturgical committees combined -

Dickens did not believe that it is ever too late to receive the gift of love and new life
 through the Christmas child.

Dickens also believed that it takes nothing less than divine intervention for most of
 us to open our hearts to the true spirit of Christmas,
 for there is at least a bit of Ebenezer Scrooge – that original Grinch – in each and in
 all of us.

You all know his “Christmas Carol”; perhaps seen a movie version of it this season as
 I did, maybe listened to it, or read this extended parable and stirring sermon of a
 story –

For that is what it is. An inspired sermon and parable.

I was struck again by its power and beauty and saving truth of it.

Let me briefly remind you.

You will remember that Dickens sends the “ghost” of Scrooge’s old partner, Jacob
 Marley, dragging his chains of avarice,

Sends the three spirits of Christmas – Past, Present and Future

Sends them to visit old “Bah, Humbug!” Scrooge on Christmas Eve –

to convict him of his hard-hearted, self-centered sins,

to warn of their consequences, and to bring him to repentance.

To convert him from being a “man of worldly mind” as Marley calls him, to being a
 giver and a receiver of gifts.

To teach him that, “mankind is indeed his business.”

To give him one more chance and the bright hope of redemption,

to help him regain his shattered youthful Dream of a life of love and goodness.

To redeem this bitter, lonely old man, who has lived so long in the shadow of death - hiding his fears and sorrows and guilt and disappointments behind a hard, cold mask of miserliness and meanness.

God's grace and love, working through Marley and those spirits, gives Scrooge another chance to repent and to become at last what God created him to be.

To receive the Christmas gift that he really wanted all along. And sure enough, after his terrible, yet hope-filled night of epiphanies, Scrooge greets Christmas morning with the joyous declaration, "I am not the man I was!"

He has been converted and transformed.

He vows, "I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all year long." A new life of gratitude and generous giving begins for him, and a better life for all those whose lives he now touches, a transformed life of joy, of Christmas love for them all.

God has indeed "blessed them every one!"

In that dark but holy night of preparation and of transformation, by the grace of God, the gift of Christmas love - the Christmas spirit - came to Ebenezer Scrooge.

It was not too late even for Scrooge, Dickens tells us, and surely, surely, if it was not too late for Ebenezer Scrooge, then surely it is never too late for you or me.

On this fourth and final Sunday of Advent, it is not too late.

It is never, never too late.

"The dark night wakes, the morning breaks,
And Christmas comes once more," we will sing Christmas Eve.

Christmas came for Scrooge.

Can something similar happen to us and for us this year?

Can the love of the Christmas Child burst into our hearts and transform us, even if right now our hearts might feel as small and cold and hard as Scrooge's?

Can we acknowledge our sins, repent of them, and begin a new, grace-filled life - a Christ-filled life of joy and love?

Can we become less of a getter and more of a giver?

Will we honor Christmas in our hearts, and try to keep it all year long?

Will those around us be blessed by our transformed self?

Can we amend our life so that we truly look forward to Christ's return as our judge – not with fear, but with joyful expectation?

Is it too late for all of that?

Is it ever too late?

Will Christmas come for you, for me again, once, ever?

Will it happen?

Please God, we pray, please, dear God, let it happen!

For all of us, please, dear God, please, let it happen!

O come, thou Dayspring from on high,

And cheer us by thy drawing nigh;

Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,

And death's dark shadow put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Emmanuel, Jesus, the Christ Child, has come and shall come to us -
to you and to me.

It is never too late.

So rejoice! Rejoice!

Rejoice in the name of the Father, and of the Son,

And of the Holy Spirit. Amen.