

Ministerial Musings

The good news is: “He’s coming!” The bad news is (you guessed it): “He’s coming!”

The word “advent” means the coming of a significant person or event. The church slapped on a capital “A” and appropriated it to name the season that starts four Sundays before Jesus comes (i.e. before his birthday, A.K.A. Christmas).

His impending arrival was good news for shepherds, wise men, fisher-men, tax collectors and prostitutes; bad news for Herod, Caiaphas, Pilate, and any Pharisee with a penchant for self-righteousness. Modern folk see it as mostly good. In fact, anything blatantly bad (shootings, scandals, unloving acts) seems even worse because it’s so contrary to the “spirit of the season.”

Admittedly, we also add an element of anxiety to Advent that our ancestors didn’t have. We’re anxious because of:

1. **Decorating Expectations** — greens to hang, nativity scenes to display, lights to string. (I thought I had the lights nailed this year since the ones in front of the church were still in the tree. Sadly, out of 300, only 14 still lit, giving our entrance a kind of “Charlie Brown Christmas” feel. Happily, Tom Schroeder took the old ones down and put new ones up.)
2. **Present Buying** — The WWII plans to invade Normandy take a back seat in complexity to those of my wife and her sisters in coordinating who-buys-what-for-whom in our family. (Their desire to get it just right has perks, though. I’ve bought Karen some perfect presents. She hands them to me in November and says, “Thanks, honey. You got me this for Christmas.”)
3. **Visiting Relatives** — ‘Nuf said.

In other words, Advent for moderns is good news (parties, carols, good will, peace on earth: even Scrooge’s heart melts). It’s also anxious news (see above). But how could it possibly be bad news? ...Well, consider the readings assigned to the first Sundays of Advent. They are marked less by joy than by dread. “Be alert at all times,” we were told in week one, “praying that you may have the strength to escape all that will take place” (Luke 21:36). The next week it was, “Who can endure the day of his coming; who can stand when he appears?” (Malachi 3:2) And let’s not forget John the Baptist: “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” (Luke 3:7)

None of that sounds good.

Advent won’t let us forget that one thing Jesus’ coming brings is judgment. That means we’ll be seen as we really are and treated accordingly — bad news for anyone who has ever had a hateful thought, or lived comfortably when someone somewhere was suffering, or ignored a chance to do something kind, or ...well, you know the list. What’s good about the coming of a perfectly righteous judge who sees us as we are?

I think the answer is in our hope that the one who sees us perfectly sees our sins, yes; but He also sees us as beloved children worth joining, worth dying for, worth forgiving. Why? Because we are precious to Him.

Perhaps that’s why the reading from Luke 3 ends: “With these and other exhortations, John proclaimed good news to them” (Luke 3:18).

Dave