

Christian pastors had a tough call to make this year. Since December 24<sup>th</sup> falls on a Sunday, we had to decide whether or not to forgo observing the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent on this Sunday morning; or just going ahead and doing a morning “Christmas Eve” service. Many of my colleagues did just that, figuring folks would not come to a morning service to observe the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent and then to return later in the evening to celebrate Christmas Eve. I chose to stick with tradition, and I apologize if some came this morning were thinking this would be a Christmas Eve service. But I invite you to consider my message this morning, and hope, if it works, all of you will come to one of our three Christmas Eve services this evening.

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Let’s begin with the following observation of comedian George Carlin who posed this question: “Have you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone driving faster than you is a moron?” Judging by the frenzied pace of our lives, most of us are morons.

A few years ago, *USA Today* analyzed 1.2 million tickets on interstate highways in 18 states and compared them to similar tickets from a decade earlier. They came to this conclusion. Not only were we speeding faster than ever, we’re speeding further above the higher speed limits we now have than we used to speed when the speed limit was lower!

The need for speed isn’t limited to driving, is it? We get irked when our line at the supermarket is the slowest, when our high-speed internet connection lags, when there’s more than four people in line at the post office with only one clerk, when the spotlight won’t change fast enough... We have bought into the notion that time is exceedingly valuable and so we take personal offense when someone or something “wastes our time.”

In such a high-speed world, the practice of religion is highly questionable. As Microsoft’s creator Bill Gates said a few years ago, “Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There’s a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning.” Bill Gates is right! Attending to our relationship with God – in

worship, in private devotion, in other acts of piety – compels us to shift into a lower gear.

If George Carlin is correct, that those going too slow are idiots and those going too fast are morons, people who take time for worship are idiots, spending time less efficiently than the non-religious. (I hasten to add that there many devout imbeciles, but that’s the topic of another sermon.)

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Now, judging by the historic use of the word “idiot,” Carlin was more correct than he knew. The word “idiot” used to designate a person in a simple station of life, as distinguished from someone who [get this!] held public office.

An idiot was someone who was unlearned, uneducated, or unskilled, as opposed to someone who was educated or skilled; a professional. One saint observed that the Scriptures are quote: “sufficient to all idiots” by which he meant that that even the simplest of folks should have access to Scripture. Another historic figure observed, “Christ was received of idiots, of the vulgar people, and of the simpler sort. [H]e was rejected, despised, and persecuted by the high priests, lawyers, scribes, doctors, and rabbis.” Think about that, the shepherds we’re the first to worship Jesus and his closest followers were of the unskilled and uneducated working class. It was the learned religious folk and public leaders who found it *expedient* to kill Jesus. (C. Blount)

In short, the true church is a place where idiots gather to waste their time. The spiritual life is for those who are willing to slow down, to pause, to wait, even as the savvy of the world think it inefficient. This is why I felt we might benefit by observing the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent; waiting to until the actual evening of Christmas Eve to observe Christmas Eve.

Let me explain further: *Advent* is a Latin word which means “coming.” Advent has been with us since it first appeared in France about 1600 years ago; a season composed of the four Sundays before Christmas. Advent was originally a period of fasting and penitence. Let me repeat: historically Advent was a time fasting rather than feasting in preparation for the unbridled joy of Christmas; which is why, in the most traditional Christian churches, it would be tantamount to

heresy to sing a Christmas carol in worship before Christmas Eve!

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But the secular world has clearly and successfully co-opted the season of Advent. According to the book, *The Treasury of Celebration*: “While the Christian calendar calls for a solemn 4- or 5-week preparation to celebrate the birth of Christ, the ‘Christmas economy’ now overshadows even Halloween, with Thanksgiving Day serving as little more than a prelude to the greatest shopping weekend of the year. In 1939, President Roosevelt moved the date of Thanksgiving back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of November to expand the Christmas shopping season.”

So, there you have it! Like Lent, Advent was introduced as a season of fasting and penitence to prepare us for the birth of Christ, but now it is the Christmas shopping season: a high-speed, non-stop consumeristic extravaganza. In the weeks before Christmas we haul out the decorations, put up the tree, buy and wrap gifts, hang lights, and so much more. Where Advent was meant to slow us down with fasting and penitence, so that we could prepare thoughtfully to experience the miraculous meaning of Christ’s birth, it is now a season of frenzied overindulgence.

I’d invite you to consider that as Christians, we might actually have a reason to resist the cultural co-optation of Christmas by remembering the ‘reason for the season’ of Advent; four Sundays to prepare for Christ’s birth. As one well-known minister, A.W. Tozer, observes, “Christ came to bring peace and we celebrate his coming by making peace impossible for 6-weeks of the year; Christ came to help the poor and we celebrate by [heaping] gifts upon those who do not need them.”

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So today, as we prepare to celebrate the life-giving gift of God’s love, let’s remember that the central emotion of Advent is that of longing; of waiting hopefully for God’s coming. The scriptures make much of waiting and patience. And so it is no accident that the first adjective Paul uses to describe love in 1 Corinthians 13 is patient. “Love is patient.”

Consider the passage from Micah this morning, that out of Bethlehem, Israel’s “Messiah will come.” 700 years passed between Micah’s prediction and the birth of Jesus; that is a long wait. And if a normal pregnancy is 9 months, then 4 Sundays is not too long for us to ‘wait patiently’ for to celebrate Christmas.

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The Roman Catholic contemplative, Henri Nouwen reminds us: “The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present [in] the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things far beyond our own imagination, fantasy or prediction.”

I invite you into time of expectant waiting throughout the rest of this day, by opening your hymnal to page 774. This Psalm, Psalm 40, is about waiting and therefore it is most appropriate for this last Sunday in Advent. (For those of you who appreciate U2, the song “40” is based on the first three verses of Psalm 40, the refrain of which is, “I will sing, sing a new song.”)

Let’s recite the first three verses, all of them, in unison: “I waited patiently for the Lord; who inclined to me and heard my cry. The Lord drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. The Lord put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and be in awe, and put their trust in the Lord.”

Tonight, we will sing and celebrate the marvelous things that God has done. If we are willing to slow down and be idiots, it’s worth the wait.

Amen.