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St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
Calhoun, GA
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1 Advent: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Title: Love as the Rule of Life

As I'm always want to do this time of year, let me say: Happy New Year.

I can say this because on the church calendar, the first Sunday in Advent is, in fact, the first day of the new church year. And so we begin this new church year as we do every year -- as ones on waiting. Waiting for He and for that which is to come.

You no doubt know that the word "advent" simply means "coming." We use the word "advent" quite often in everyday speech. For example, we might say that the renaissance marked the advent of a new era in art, science and religion.

The discovery of electricity marked the advent of the industrial age.

Or if you are a fan of SEC football, you might say that the hiring of Coach Steve Spurrier marked the advent of competitive football at the University of Florida.

This is a time of year when we put ourselves in the posture of anticipation, waiting for he who is to come – yes, the Christ child, but also that which the Christ, in his fullness, will bring. And this season also points us in the direction of the process of coming ever closer to the reality of our better selves, both individually as children of light as well as the community of human kind that populates this planet that we have named earth.

And so today is a day which anticipates new beginnings. New beginnings not only in cosmic terms but also in terms of very down to earth realities.

One of the ways that we represent or signify that we are living in a time of new beginnings is by the displaying of an Advent wreath and candles. We have one here. It is a symbol of the Light of Christ which comes in the darkness.

The story is told about the writer Robert Lewis Stevenson growing up in Scotland around the turn of the century. Young Robert lived on a hillside outside of a small town. Each evening he would sit in his family’s kitchen and look down on the town, and watch the lamp lighter ignite each of the town’s street lamps below. It was as if each light emerged one at a time. Stevenson recalled saying to his mother once, “Look mother, there is a man down there punching holes in the darkness.”

That is what the light of Christ is like. It punches holes in the darkness of the troubled human soul and in a troubled world. And so each week as we progress through Advent, we will light more candles to express this desire and this longing.

And so the question becomes, “What are we to do with this time of waiting -- this time of anticipation and preparation?”

Well, the prophet Isaiah gives us this: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. This is but another way of saying: let us be intentional about casting away the works of darkness and embracing the light.

The Psalmist says pray for peace – peace in your own spirit and peace among and between all persons.

And from Paul’s Letter to the Romans, in the paragraph right before the one we heard read just a moment ago, Paul says that we owe no one nothing except to love one another. And then he reminds that what the commandments given Moses on Mt. Sinai have in common is that to break any of them results in an offense toward or abuse of our neighbor. If we take from or steal from our neighbor, or covet what he has, or even kill our neighbor – we have committed a grave offense against that one. In largest measure the commandments are quite simply about not abusing one another. The commandments are quite simply a call to love our neighbor.

This is the Apostle Paul at his best. This is Paul saying that as we come to a place where we can be loving of our neighbor we have, in effect, ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ We put on Christ as we would put on a warm coat in the winter. We literally *clothe ourselves* in the things of Christ, the things that are good, the things that are loving, the things that punch holes in the darkness.

Jesus simply says, “Therefore, you must be ready.”

And Jesus will say a hundred times over, as do all of our texts this morning, in one way or another, the way that we will be ready is to let love be

our guide, our example, our intention. If we just let that simple principle, that simple prescription, that simple way of being and thinking be our guide.... we will be ready. We will be prepared. And all will be right with you and with me.

You know Jesus did not coin the term Christianity. That would come later. In fact, Jesus' movement had no name. A perceptive observer might have called Jesus' way the way of radically reformed Judaism. But the earliest followers of Jesus in fact simply called the Jesus movement 'The Way.' Simply put, this simply meant the way of love.

The Psalmist this morning focuses on Jerusalem and the tribes of Israel when he prays for peace and prosperity. But Jesus later comes along and offers something of a corrective. He pushes a reset button on the theology of the time of the psalmist. Jesus will say to focus on the tribes of Israel is fine and well, but God's view of the family of God is ever so much greater than a single tribe or nation. God's kingdom includes *all whom God has made*. And it includes all whom God will ever make.

Jesus will say this no plainer than when asked the question, "Who is my neighbor?" And the point of the story of the Good Samaritan is that your neighbor is everyone with whom you share this planet.

Love is universal. It knows no tribe. It knows no boundaries. It knows no nation. We are not called to love those whom we might judge to be loveable or whom we might desire to love. We are simply called to love.

I know that if we each thought about it a moment we could think of times when we have seen or maybe experienced or have seen love overcome adversity, or maybe differences of opinion having to do with say long-held and/or deep-seated political, religious, or social ideology. Times when maybe love has conquered deep-seated prejudice. Times maybe even when a marriage, out of a deep love for one another, has overcome an episode of unfaithfulness.

Last week, I, along with Richard and Jeanne had the good pleasure of representing St. Timothy's Episcopal Church at Annual Council. And one of the things that takes place at that Council is an address by the bishop. It's called an address rather than a sermon because it does not take place within the context of a worship service, but be assured that this address is always sermon-esk. And in that address, Bishop Wright told this story. It happens that he was in Cuba about three weeks ago as he is involved in some mutual ministry there. And he told how one morning, before breakfast, he was standing at the window of the room in which he was staying. It happened that something of a storm had come in during the night. It was raining and

the wind was blowing quite hard. Rob said that as he staring out the window, he saw two doves on a power line. They were poised about a foot or so apart. And as he watched the birds one began to move toward the other and they began to edge toward one another until they were pressed together, side by side. And there they stayed, huddled and pressed together, heads down, contending with and struggling against the storm. Then Rob said, he witnessed what to him was an amazing sight. One of the birds lifted its wing and very purposefully covered the dove with whom he was sharing that powerline perch.

My friends in Christ, Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. In the meantime, let us be about seeking our better selves. In the meantime, in the waiting, let us be reminded that God calls us simply to love one another. In the meantime as we await the arrival of the Christ child and the advent of creation in all of its expansive glory, as we await that time when love will indeed rule all of God's creation, we are to practice the art of love as if Christ has already returned.

As the Apostle Paul said, let us put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us adopt love as our rule of life. Let us adopt love as if our very lives depend on it for you know what? It absolutely does.

Amen