

Grow Me Up, Jesus!

(sermon for November 27, 2011 – Advent Sunday 1)

By Dr. David R. Mains

Text: 1 Peter 4:12-15 and 2 Corinthians 4:7-10.

Subject: The Season of Advent.

Desired Response: Rejoice and pray fervently.

How To: Make a list of reasons to fast and pray, and figure out the dates you will do this.

How Long: Should have this assignment completed by the end of this day.

Sermon in a Sentence: The Season of Advent is a time to rejoice in the great freedoms we experience as American believers, and also to pray fervently for our many Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world who live under conditions we would not consider as free.

The present population of the world is just under 7 billion people.

The best guesstimates as to the number of individuals who have lived on the earth since its beginning is somewhere between 100 and 110 billion.

Here's another guesstimate. This one is more precise, however. Since 1780, 554 million people have lived under freedom here in the United States.

Let me tell you where I got these figures. Best-selling author Chris Steward teamed with Ted Steward, a U.S. District Court judge, to write the book *Seven Miracles That Saved America*. This recent best-seller was the winner of the National Award for Public Communications from the Freedoms Foundation in Valley Forge.

The two have written a second book that came out this year, called *The Miracle of Freedom: 7 Tipping Points That Saved the World*. That's where I got the figures I quoted before. Allow me to read two of their short paragraphs that will review what I said earlier:

"It has been estimated that 554 million people have lived in freedom in the United States since 1780. We can also postulate that perhaps another billion, or fewer, have lived under freedom in the other European nations that evolved, in fits and spurts, into free nations during the twentieth century.

" Even being generous in our estimates, it seems clear that fewer than five billion of the earths' total inhabitants have ever lived under conditions that we could consider free. This would

be something like 4.5 percent of people who have ever lived. And these are generous estimates. The actual numbers might be much lower than this.”

To me, as a preacher, this is quite significant. It means that of all the people in the world in the past who read the Bible, or read it now, the vast majority of them have NOT done so in a context of incredible freedom such as we presently experience in America. Like the early believers in the New Testament church during the Roman era, most all the Christians who have read this Bible down through the years have done so with an awareness that there was a great risk involved in embracing its truths.

When you and I, as Americans, read God’s Word, we can do so almost academically. And we try to figure out how this material applies to us. And there’s nothing wrong with that. But seldom do we wonder how someone back in New Testament times might have read these words, or what does this mean today to a Christian in North Korea, or in a Middle Eastern Muslim country, or to someone in China?

For example, here’s a short part of a paragraph from 1 Peter 4:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed (or when Jesus returns). If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

That passage speaks forcefully and personally to the world in which most people have lived.

For another example, here’s Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

I’m sure those words would be quite inspirational to a Christian presently living in Iran.

Apart from Scripture, let me give you another example of how we, as more comfortable contemporary believers, are often out of sync with most of our fellow followers of Christ both past and present. For all too many of us, the arrival of Advent means that we need to start to get a move on if we want this to be another fantastic Christmas for our extended family. I mean, every church person knows there are only four Sundays of Advent, and then the biggest day of the year family-wise is quickly upon us.

But centuries back, Advent was put at the start of the annual church calendar to mark the first coming to Earth of the Christ-child as a babe in Bethlehem, AND ALSO to remind us that there will be a second coming of Jesus to this Earth in power and great glory. For the suffering church this is always the great hope to which they cling, and rightly so.

I believe the Advent Season was the opportune time last year for the Egyptian church to have held their 40-day fast, and to have prayed fervently for a special visitation of the Lord to help them in their time of need.

In that country where 90% of the population is Muslim, Christians have experienced a long history of discrimination. I told you several weeks ago that the Pew Foundation on Religion and Public Life ranks Egypt as the fifth-worst country in the world for religious freedom. It also includes Egypt among the 12 worst countries in the world in terms of violence against religious minorities, and specifically in regard to hostilities against Christians. So, it's obvious that our brothers and sisters in the Lord in Egypt haven't known the freedom to worship that we experience here in the States.

I also reported earlier that since Mubarak took office in 1981, there were more than 1500 violent attacks against Christians—1500 violent attacks against Christians, leaving thousands of Egyptian believers killed or injured.

Well, I choose to believe that special 40-day time of prayer and fasting at the end of 2010 played a critical role in bringing about major changes in Egypt, including toppling the government. The question remaining is, what will the future bring?

Democracy in Egypt won't necessarily mean religious freedom. Those two words—*democracy* and *freedom*—don't necessarily fit together. We assume they should, but they don't. For example, what happens in Egypt if Islamic parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, gain control?

Let's assume that fair elections are held. Still, a 2010 Pew Research Center study showed that 84.5% of Muslims in Egypt believe that anyone who converts from Islam to Christianity should be publicly executed!

That same survey revealed that 95% believe that Islam should play a large role in the politics of the new Egypt.

Our American military forces went into Iraq against Saddam Hussein. Now it's estimated that half the Christians who lived there before the war have left the country. How come? Because they no longer feel safe! So the disappearance of a dictator can sometimes make things even less secure for Christians.

But let me make my main point. It's simply this. *The Season of Advent is a time to rejoice in the great freedoms we experience as American believers, and also to pray fervently for our many Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world who live under conditions we would not consider as free.*

Again, the Season of Advent is a time to rejoice in the great freedoms we experience as American believers. Even with the separation of church and state here, the influence of Jesus has been profound on this nation.

2 Corinthians 3:17 reads, "...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." In this country we rejoice in this freedom. Hopefully we never take it for granted, nor allow it to continue to morph into license.

I would also like Advent 2011 to be a time when we as American believers pray fervently for our many Christian brothers and sisters *throughout the world* who live in conditions we would not consider free. For them, during the Season of Advent, I would assume that unlike here, the *Second Coming* of Jesus would overshadow even their identification with His First Coming.

What do you think Christians in Libya are praying these days? How about those in Uzbekistan? What kind of urgent prayers are being said to the Lord by Christians right about now in Syria?

I can only imagine.

My guess is that such prayers are a lot different from those being said regularly by God's people here in the States. What do you think?

[Speak the following paragraph slowly and thoughtfully, as though you were praying.]

"No matter what's ahead, help me to remain true to You, dear Jesus, even in this setting where You're not honored as rightful Lord and king. ... Because You've done so much for me, under normal circumstances I don't think I could ever deny You. But these aren't normal circumstances, and I'm frightened. ... When my brothers and sisters in the faith are nearby, I'm stronger than when I'm made to stand on my own. ... It's when I'm all alone that I frighten more easily, especially when those I love are threatened. ... I don't understand why being a Christian is considered so offensive. ... I know that You are coming again, Jesus. That's wonderful. ... I pray that it could be soon. ... I love You, Lord."

Once again, this Advent Season, I was hoping that we of the church here in America could stand more fervently in prayer with our many brothers and sisters throughout the world who live in conditions we wouldn't consider as free. Resaid, that we the privileged few could truly identify with the unfortunate majority of God's people who have never known the great blessing of religious freedom.

"But I don't know how to do that," you say.

My simple response is that I believe you can do it through prayer and fasting—and don't assume that what I'm suggesting means you have to jettison all your plans for another really wonderful celebration of your traditional Christmas here in America.

Truthfully, fasting a meal or two now and then won't mean very much to you ... or to your counterparts in places like Egypt. Writing out a list of the important reasons you feel compelled to fast is a better beginning. "I'm fasting, Lord..."

1. To be supportive of my fellow Christians in Egypt.
2. I also want to intercede on behalf of the believers in Libya.
3. By fasting, I'm praying, as I believe you instructed us, for the many Christians still suffering in China.
4. And you list other specific countries 5, 6, 7, however many.
8. I'm also praying for the United States of America and the intense need I feel for a great moving of your Spirit here—first among your people and then among non-believers as well. Let revival happen, Lord!
9. I have a personal burden I'm deeply concerned about. My child is far from the Lord. ... I have a close friend who is quite ill. ... Our church has lost its first love. ... Whatever...
10. I also want to fast to express to you how truly grateful I am to have lived all these years in a country where we have religious freedom.

These and other reasons are what prompt me to fast. Because I feel them deeply, I'm choosing not to eat on the following days ... or for these 24-hour periods ... or two days in a row ... whatever."

I believe this kind of thoughtful participation will make your involvement much more meaningful.

Listen to me. Make out your list of reasons today, and also mark your calendar today for when you will begin fasting. If those two items are not accomplished by the end of this day, the chances are strong that they will not get done.

As the weeks pass, I'm sure you will tweak your list, but you need to have it before you even start this discipline.

Then when the first fast day comes, every time you feel hunger pains, tell yourself, "What I'm experiencing is nothing compared to what those I'm praying are going through even now. And it pales in comparison to the 40 days of not only fasting, but battling with the devil that marked the start of my Lord's ministry. Grow me up, Jesus. I've had it too soft. Help me become like you, I pray." (Maybe that should be the new #1 at the start of your "here's-why-I'm-fasting" list—learning to be more Christ-like!)