

Getting Our Church Ready

(sermon for December 11, 2011 – Advent Sunday 3)

By Dr. David R. Mains

Text: Matthew 1:23.

Subject: Celebrating the “arrival of Jesus.”

Desired Response: Make sure our reception plans are appropriate.

How To: Pinpoint the areas where the church is not properly prepared and then fast and pray accordingly.

How Long: Want to add urgency and intensity to commitment.

Sermon in a Sentence: As our church gets ready to celebrate “the arrival of Jesus,” let’s make sure our reception plans are appropriate.

Two weeks from today we will join with Christians around the world in celebrating the arrival of the Christ Child. The word “Christ” in Greek, the language of the New Testament, is the equivalent of the Hebrew word “messiah.”

I said “the word ‘Christ’ is the equivalent,” not “the name ‘Christ,’” because “messiah,” or “Christ,” is not a name. It’s a title, like governor, or president, or king. Only this given title Messiah/Christ is far more impressive. It means “the one anointed of *God*.”

“Jesus” is a Hebrew name, and sometimes people call their sons Jesus [**Spanish pronunciation**] or Jesus. But no thinking person would name a boy “Messiah” or “Christ.”

So, celebrating, as our congregation will soon be doing, the birth of the Christ Child, THE LORD’S ANOINTED ONE, should carry with it much more weight than many of our simple seasonal traditions like eggnog, sleigh bells or talking about toy-making elves.

Here is what I want to underscore in this third message of the Advent Season. As our congregation gets ready to celebrate the birth of our Messiah, Jesus the Christ, let’s make sure that our reception plans are appropriate. Let me explain.

To begin with, it’s normal when celebrating the birthday of someone famous who is no longer with us—say Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa—to think about their lives, not their births.

Even with family birthdays we don’t focus on how much this baby weighed, the hospital in which that one was born, who the doctor responsible for the delivery was, and so on.

Granted, with Jesus we have some extraordinary birth-elements involved ... like His mother being a virgin ... a mysterious star that guides astrologers from far-away countries to come and bring Him gifts ... a massive angel choir singing in the night sky to a most-unlikely audience of sheep-tenders, and then telling them to go see this newborn who is wrapped in rags, lying in a manger in nearby Bethlehem. But then in our Christmas celebrations we tend to overlook the incredible adult contributions Jesus made.

So this Sunday I propose to get a fresh perspective on this first coming of the Christ. I say, let's think about celebrating this upcoming supposed date of Jesus' birth by considering how to honor the adult Jesus.

If we knew that the grown-up Jesus, whose ministry was extraordinary, were to join us in two weeks, what would our preparation be like?

1. Copying the Wise Men, we would undoubtedly want to worship Him. If Jesus were here in the flesh, I believe many of us would kneel, even prostrate ourselves before Him. That's the body language of worship. We would also sing our praises like never before.
2. Holiness would be an issue that would quickly surface. Jesus and sin don't mix well. Seeing the ugly nail-scars in His hands would be hard on anyone who came on Christmas Sunday having really messed up during these next two weeks.
3. I sense that our love for one another would suddenly be incredibly important. Knowing the great emphasis Jesus placed on relationships, especially in His Church, we would feel funny if we were hopping mad at someone in the congregation. And what if our Lord asked how we were getting along with so-and-so? That could be embarrassing.
4. Whether or not one has been involved in serving Jesus comes to mind. I have this sense that we would instantly realize that He has done so much for us, that we would feel funny if we had no time in our schedules to serve others on His behalf.

Do you understand what I am doing? I'm just reflecting on what our responses might be were the adult Jesus to grace our church with His presence on Christmas Sunday.

5. If He turned down my request to preach, I believe just having Him sit here during the message would be a huge plus. And what if by chance I said something and everyone heard Jesus give an "amen." Wouldn't that make the Scriptures come alive?
6. I'm certain everyone would want to talk to Him. If Jesus said He had the time and would listen, people would line up and patiently wait their turn ... to express gratitude, make confession and ask for forgiveness, or state personal needs. Being given face-to-face time with the risen Christ would be an incredible privilege for you and you and you ... and me.
7. I know we would all want our family and friends and business associates and neighbors and classmates to be here. We would hardly take no for an answer. "You

have to meet this young man,” we would tell them. “There’s no one else like him in the whole world.”

I could say more. But that’s enough to establish the direction I want to head next.

By way of review ... if Jesus honored us by attending our church on Christmas Sunday,

- We would worship Him,
- We would embrace righteousness and renounce evil.
- We would treat one another with genuine love.
- We would serve Him with feelings of true gratitude.
- We would sense the Scriptures coming alive.
- We would feel like talking to Him was a great privilege. And...
- We would delight in introducing Him to others.

Does this sound good to you?

Most of you would respond, “Of course it does!”

In fact, some of you who are still spectators to the prayer-and-fasting movement that is presently going on, maybe this is the time to reconsider your involvement with us.

Then again, maybe I’m assuming too much. I mean, if Jesus came here bodily two Sundays from now and everyone knew how ideally we should act, it’s conceivable some of you might stay away.

Why?

Maybe you’re not ready to embrace righteousness and renounce evil, because you find certain sins rather enjoyable.

Or, the idea of treating one another with genuine love pushes you faster and further than you’re willing to go.

Or, you aren’t all that comfortable with the thought of inviting others here to meet Him.

Or, there’s a good possibility that serving Him would crowd the schedule with which you’re relatively comfortable.

Or, talking to Jesus face-to-face freaks you out.

Or, whatever.

I think it’s good for everyone to come to grips with your feelings regarding the idea of celebrating the presence of the adult Jesus, because the reactions I’ve been describing are what surface during authentic periods of revival. At one extreme, some are thrilled; at the other, people purposely find excuses to stay away; and there are all kinds of variations in the middle.

You see, the outstanding characteristic of all genuine times of spiritual awakening or revival in the church is an overwhelming sense of the presence of the Lord. It’s like the risen Christ has suddenly made an appearance, and for some that’s wonderful, while for others it’s terrifying.

If you are presently praying and fasting for revival in America, these are the specifics of what you are asking God for. You want the presence of the Lord to manifest itself in the following ways:

- Heartfelt worship
- Holy living
- Genuine love
- Grateful service
- Scripture coming alive
- Authentic prayer
- Natural evangelism

I've listed these in the bulletin so you can remember them and make them a part of your prayer life.

Is that all? No, there's more. If you're a believer in Egypt, you're asking for the Prince of Peace to make Himself known. You long to be able to live in peace, unmolested just because of your religious beliefs. You want the God of Peace to show Himself strong and to protect you from attacks by those wanting to do you harm. Maybe you ask Him to stay close to you even if you are persecuted or tortured for your faith.

In the U.S. we have a much-easier list to bring before the Lord. And that list is a starting place for evaluating where we are spiritually.

So, as you pray, you look at our church and ask:

- What's the worship like?
- Are we a righteous people?
- Do we truly love each other?
- Is service on behalf of the Lord a common characteristic?
- Do we honor and obey the Scriptures?
- Are we a praying people?
- Is evangelism a shared value?

What about personally?

- Does my worship stop after Sunday morning?
- Do I try to cover up secret sins?
- Does Christ-like love mark who I am?
- What about my Christian service?
- Am I regularly in God's Word?
- Prayer-wise, would the Lord say I'm mature or a novice?
- Do I have a burden for the lost?

If I'm not who I should be, spiritually speaking, am I ready to change?

Asked a different way, do I still want the adult Jesus to be here in two weeks when we celebrate His birthday, or would I prefer that we kind of go back to the welcome “baby” Jesus routine? Is the presence of the Lord something I truly prize?

In the book *Out of My Life* by Dr. Edman, who died when he was president of Wheaton College, he wrote about the life-changing experience of Dr. A. J. Gordon, after whom Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts are named. In this extended section from that book, Edman captures this sense of God’s presence most of us say we want.

It was Saturday night when wearied from the work of preparing Sunday’s sermon, I fell asleep and the dream came. I was in the pulpit just ready to begin my sermon when a stranger entered and passed slowly up the left aisle of the church. He proceeded nearly halfway up the aisle when a gentleman stepped out and offered him a place in his pew, which was quietly accepted.

Excepting the face and features of the stranger, everything in the scene is distinctly remembered. Only the countenance of the visitor could never be recalled. But as I began my sermon, my attention became riveted on this hearer. If I would avert my eyes from him for a moment, they would instinctively return to him, so that he held my attention rather than I held his till the discourse ended.

After the benediction the departing congregation filed into the aisles, but before I could reach him, the visitor had left the house. The one with whom he sat remained, however, and approaching him with great eagerness I asked, “Can you tell me who that stranger was who sat in your pew this morning?”

In the most matter-of-fact way he replied, “Why do you not know that man? It was Jesus of Nazareth!” With a sense of keenest disappointment I said, “My dear sir, why did you let him go without introducing him to me?”

With the same nonchalant air, the gentleman replied, “Oh, don’t be troubled. He has been here today, and no doubt he will come again.”

And now came an indescribable rush of emotion. The Lord himself, whose I am and whom I serve, has been listening to me today. What was I saying? Was I preaching on some popular theme in order to catch the ear of the public? Was he impressed with the music and the order of worship?

It didn't seem at that moment as though I could ever again care or have the smallest curiosity as to what men might say of preaching, worship or church if I could only know that he had not been displeased, that he would not withhold his feet from coming again because he had been grieved at what he might have seen or heard.

One thing lingered in my mind with something of comfort and more of awe. *He has been here today and no doubt he will come again.*

It seems to me this "presence" is too often the missing aspect of the American church. Christ, the anointed of God, is here with us. He will be on Christmas Sunday as well, and no doubt He will come again.* Will we receive Him properly? What about you ... and what about me?

* Matthew 1:23 reads, "*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means, 'God with us.'*"

Therefore, as our church gets ready to celebrate "the arrival of Jesus," I say, let's make sure our reception plans are appropriate.