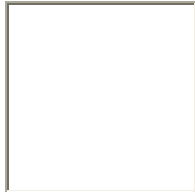


Please pray with me: Loving God, I pray that these words of mine might have some of your truth in them, where they do, I pray that it might reach the heart of someone in this congregation this morning. Where these are merely my words and of no account, I pray that no harm would be done.

I don't know how many of you have seen the movie *The Princess Bride*, but in my home it is a family favorite. It is a spoof on other fantasy movies and full of wonderful sarcastic humor. This is such a fun movie and if you haven't seen it yet, take an evening and enjoy it. The basis for the movie is a grandfather reading a book to his sick grandson and the book is the story line. It's a love story and a fantasy action comedy. Star-crossed lovers, over-acting evil villains who kidnap the girl, and an evil prince who is thoroughly drubbed by the end of the story. There are two lines often repeated among fans of this cult classic movie. One is "As you wish" which essentially is the stand in line for "I love you" throughout the whole movie and cuts right to its message. The other is the word, "Inconceivable!" which is repeated over and over by one of the movie's villains. "Inconceivable" he says as the good guy keeps gaining on them... "Inconceivable!" he says as the good guy climbs his way up the unscaleable cliffs. "Inconceivable!" he says when the good guy fails to fall down the cliffs after the villain does his best to thwart him. Having heard this from the villain so many times, one of his partners in crime responds to him saying, "You keep saying that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Harold Camping has made his fortune on the backs of people who have bought into his interpretation of Advent, the liturgical time of the year when we wait in expectation for the returning Christ. Harold Camping, is the guy who predicted the world's end last May and again this October. He also predicted it back in 1994. Needless to say, we're still here. He's not alone, however, in his predictions of the "end times" or "second coming of Christ" or, as theologians call it, the Parousia – Greek for the expected arrival or official visit of someone important, in this case, Jesus. Many in the early church believed that a second coming was imminent, to happen within their lifetimes. There have been dozens of people, that we have record of, who have predicted a specific date over just the last two hundred years. Most of today's Christian traditions talk about the second coming as part of their creeds, their Eucharistic services, and their systematic theologies. Even other faith traditions outside of Christianity, including Islam, have an expectation of a bodily return of Jesus to earth for a rather militaristic victory over unbelievers. Ironic, I think, for a pacifist revolutionary teacher. Two thousand years later, we look back and perhaps we need to articulate what many on the outside of our churches are saying, "You keep saying that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means “coming” a Latin translation from the Greek “Parousia” that looks to the second coming of Christ or bears witness to the Hebrew’s wait for the messiah in Jesus. In the church where I grew up, we didn’t actually observe Advent, we celebrated Christmas for a whole month and a half. It started on Thanksgiving at my parent’s house where we’d sing Christmas carols to our hearts content as we did three days ago, and we didn’t stop until Epiphany on January 6th at the Christmas Tree Burning behind the church. In between there were Christmas pageants, Christmas parties, Christmas caroling, Christmas dinners, Christmas Bazaars, and music, music, music everywhere. But never once do I remember us talking about waiting for Christmas or waiting for Christ. Christ was with us! At every moment. In every song. Christ was in every smile every time someone opened a Christmas gift. Christ was present in the faces of the families who were served at the food pantry in the back of the church and at the grocery store where we saw other neighbors getting ready for the festivities. Christ was in our midst at every party and every tree burning. Sure we had advent wreaths and advent calendars, but they were part of the journey, the festival, the celebration. Christmas is about God breaking into our lives at the darkest time of the year and the hardest times of our lives and bringing hope, giving us a chance to step away from the monotony of the day to day, and stepping outside of the crush of empire, civilization, and the Market God. At Christmastime, the whole season from Thanksgiving to Epiphany, folks are a little more joyful, a little



more generous, a little more willing to laugh and share and eat together and love one another. For me, Advent is a celebration of the culmination of a long year’s wait until we again reach this joyfilled and jubilant holiday. What if the peaceable kin*dom that we have been waiting for is already here and is simply more pronounced during this beautiful time of year? What if Advent or “coming” is about us coming into awareness of our place in a generous world? What if Parousia or “expectation” of Christ is about Christ expecting us to arrive, for our minds to be turned to the things of greater import – like family, charity, music, and beauty?

Yet Christmas can happen without the turning of our minds and hearts and if I were ever to use the line “Put the Christ back in Christmas” this is what I would mean: We cannot serve both God and Mammon, or the Market god.

Two days ago, on Black Friday, I read about the woman who pepper sprayed her fellow shoppers so that she could get first dibs on the electronics that she wanted to purchase at Wal-Mart. I read about the fist fights. I

read about the market predictions and Wall Street's reliance on its being well attended. Black Friday. The high holy day of the Market God. You remember Baal the god of the golden calf, the god that Elijah challenged in his dueling alters in the first book of Kings, the god of empire and civilization? This is the Market God and ironically, Black Friday, somewhat twistedly reminiscent of our Good Friday in the midst of a season about a poor infant child wrapped in swaddled clothes who couldn't get a room at the inn let alone a Playstation,- Black Friday is the day we pray to this Market god for the best parking space, the lowest deals, and the most advantageous place in line. Santa Claus has gone from being a saint of charity to a caricature of greed and worse. When folks tell me they don't believe in God it is often the great big Santa Claus in the sky that they don't believe in, and I'm with them on that. Don't make a caricature of my God, my God is substantially more interesting than that. Where I get frustrated and want to put, as they say, the "Christ back in Christmas" is when our greed, our anxiety, our willingness to believe that we and our children and our children's children really need the newest little plastic gadgets in order to be happy or to have a fulfilling Christmas season.

Christmas is about love. It is about the greatest love the world has ever known. It is God saying, "As you wish." Not in a cynical, get-everything-you-ask-for kind of way, but in a peacemaking, justice bringing, get-what-you-need kind of way. For me this is Advent. The journey of our arriving, of our turning towards an expectant Christ. I say let us sing Christmas carols all month long. Let us be joyful. And let us neglect to sacrifice to the Market God, but rather give with joy and thanksgiving all of who we are to one another and to the God who breaks into our lives at our darkest moments. It is one of many chances for us to turn our hearts to God, the God of the manger scene and the cross, the God of justice and mercy, and say "As you wish" right back.

Advent? "I do not think it means what you think it means." Let us be joyful for Christ is here with us, breaking into our lives, singing beside us and through us, calling us forward into a new Way of life, today, tomorrow, all month long and all year long.

Amen.

Sing: Joy to the World