

**2 Advent: December 4, 2009**  
**“Our Story is Not Yet Finished”**

Today we begin the second week of Advent. I did not grow up in a traditional liturgical church, so the idea of a church calendar is a fairly new one for me. Sure, we celebrated “advent” in our tradition, but it was usually with an emphasis of looking forward, towards Christmas as an end goal. I had never understood Advent as a season that had its own purpose; that is, until I became an Anglican. Growing up in my tradition, non-denominational, Charismatic, you looked forward to Christmas, because it pointed to the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of God in flesh, for the purpose of living the perfect sinless life, only to be crucified on the cross, so that He could take away all of my sins, and at the end of my life, I would die and go to heaven.

Now, I know that this is true, at least the spirit of it. What I mean is, the message of Advent, has to do with all of that -- the incarnation, God dwelling with us, living the perfect life as an example for us, and then dying on the cross, and rising from the dead. But yet, Advent means so much more. There has been a movement since the Reformation, that the incarnation and crucifixion of our Lord, *only* deals with our sin, and helps us to *escape this world*, for the sake of a more beautiful and peaceful one: heaven. However, in reading our lessons this morning, I think the season of Advent points to something even greater. Our readings this morning bring concrete hope. But they also bring the need for contemplation, and they should certainly challenge us. We might be tempted to read them with our get out of jail -or Hell -card in mind, but I think that does a disservice to them. You see, when looking at scripture, one must keep in mind, that there is always more than meets the eye. The Bible presents us with a story. A story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Throughout the church calendar we remember, and re-enact that story, always with one foot in the past, and another in the future. All the while, we remain right here, and right now. The season of Advent truly embodies that, and our readings bear it out as well. We heard this morning of different characters. John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul and Timothy, the brothers and sisters in Phillipi, and Pontius Pilate as well as Abraham, among many others. All of these characters play crucial roles in the first Advent story, and we will see that

along with Jesus and the others, we are the main stars and characters, in the second Advent story. With this in mind, lets dive in.

In his epistle to the Phillipians, the apostle Paul is writing to a community of Christians. We are told in the book of Acts that the community at Phillipi which is in Northern Greece, was the first place in Europe that heard the good news from Paul, the message of the crucified and risen Christ. We know from the epistle that the church at Phillipi had brought great joy to Paul, and, that he a great fondness for the community. In verse 5 of this mornings reading we are told that Paul gave thanks for the church, because of their "sharing" in the gospel. This word "sharing" in the original language is an interesting one. The greek word Paul uses here means someone that has a close association involving mutual interests, as well as participation. Paul tells the community at Phillipi that, he sees them as partners, or, characters, if you will, in the gospel. For Paul, to be a partner or character in the gospel, is the highest calling. It means that you have a relationship because of the risen Christ. There is a special binding that occurs between believers. They are able to share in the stories of faith, struggle, and hope.

I know this to be true first hand. I was at a wedding recently, for a friend of mine who went to my church youth group. It was amazing to see all those people from our past, several years later, having no contact, but yet, you could never tell. We have this bond, that could never be broken. We have experienced the power of the risen Christ, and have been forever changed. Do you have those relationships? Those people who you may not have seen for years, other characters in the "story" that when you reconnect, its like no time has ever past, or that it is just the next scene in the story? You have such a strong basis for a relationship, not even time can destroy it. This is so much of what the world is missing. The work of the gospel, is proclaiming to a hurting world, that you have the answers. Just like the community at Phillipi, we are surrounded by pain and suffering. A world whose story is a tragedy, with no so sign of a good ending in sight. A story whose main characters, are only looking out for themselves, and their best interests. The latest statistics show: over half of the world's population lives on less than two dollars a day. Less than two dollars a day. Over 80%

of the world's wealth, is controlled by less than 10% of the world's population. It is a story that is unfair, unjust, and needs a new direction in plot.

There are millions that do not have access to clean drinking water, and that many more will go to bed hungry. We live in a world where slavery still exists, women are treated like second class citizens, and men are trying to live up to impossible expectations. We, as well as the believers at Phillipi, are dealing with our personal shortcomings, fears, and hurts. But the gospel, the good news, says that this is all changing! Because of the first Advent, the incarnation, God taking on flesh, the plot can and has changed. Paul is pleased to say that, his brothers and sisters in Phillipi, have experienced the power of the resurrected Christ, and they are now partnering with him, to declare that a new world has begun, and the story is changing.

The reality is, the new plot-line has started with Jesus Christ, but it is not finished. When Christ died on the cross, all our sins died with Him, We are told that all we must do to be forgiven is believe in Him. When we are baptized, we become members of the faith community, and we become partners with God. But sometimes, it does feel like we have lost our share in the business. Have you ever felt like that? Have you looked back at when you became a follower of Christ, and thought: Shoot. This is hard! I remember when I first became a Christian in high school, and I felt like I was living a dream. I had become born again. I had decided following Christ was all I wanted to do. I was experiencing this amazing joy, the type of joy that a little kid feels on Christmas morning, It's how I felt after my first kiss, and it's how I felt on the day I married my wife. There was this sense that nothing could bring me down, I loved being in the story, it was me and Jesus, and we were tight.

Then, like with so many things in life, the honeymoon ended. I remember feeling like God had left me, and that I was still the same person as before I became a Christian. I was still struggling with the same sins in my life, lying, jealousy, pride, among many others! And I felt betrayed. That once again I was all alone. But the reality is, we are not alone. Paul knows, that when the gospel message of Jesus does its work, it is not a "flash in the pan" religious experience. It doesn't fade away in time. Rather,

if God is the originator of the experience, one can be assured that God will be faithful to see it through. Because God is always with us, looking after His children. When we become characters of the second Advent, we are partnering in developing the story. This is part of the nature of who God is, unchanging, unalterable, and completely faithful. Even in those times when we feel most unworthy of God's love, we *ARE* still loved. When you become a Christian, you are sealed by Christ's love. As Paul tells us in Romans 8, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. And it is because of this love, that we become new creations, and become a light to a dark world. I heard a preacher recently say, "God loves us just the way we are, and too much to let us stay that way." This is the Advent story, that each of us is called to experience. In verse 6 Paul tells the community at Phillipi that, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you, will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." This is what it means to be in "the story." The end *has* been written about in the New Testament, but we have only experienced the beginning. It is the middle of the story, the part we are living in right now, that will bring about the conclusion. Imagine seeing the first 10 minutes, and then the last 10 minutes, of a two hour movie.

We would want to know *how* in the *world* it ended the way it did. God has in fact begun the movie in our lives, and we are told where it is going. The film has begun, and there have definitely been bumps along the way. We know about our "spiritual parents," Adam and Eve, and the decisions they made. Choices that have in fact affected all of us. You know, every time you feel that desire to kill the person who cuts you off in traffic, or you look at that thing or person that is not yours, and you are willing to do anything to have them, you can thank old Adam and Eve for that. Our leaning towards sin comes from our spiritual parents. But it is decisions we end up making, they are our own fault, as we say each week in our confession. And we must remember, *We were never intended to live like this*, to feel like this, or to want evil like this. But, we do. However, our other relative, Jesus, has changed the story. Through his birth as a man, living a sinless life, dying on the cross, and rising from the dead, the story has taken a drastic turn. One of my favorite parts of our eucharistic liturgy, is when Jorell so beautifully sings, "Therefore we proclaim the mystery of Faith," and we all prayerfully

respond, "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again." It sums up our story, and the Advent story. Every time we partake in the Lord's supper, we are allowed to go outside of the limits of time, and experience the full story: beginning, middle, and end. This is why the eucharist is so important. We gain a foretaste, a sneak peak if you will, of the end of the story. This is what the Mass means. *Ite missa est* "it is sent." After we, the people of Christ, have partaken in His body and blood, we are sent out into the world, to aid in the story. This is our own personal Advent experience. We are in the middle of the story, and we know that God will be faithful to end it, the way God desires, with all being reconciled. And yet, God has called us to be co-writers. We get to help God in finishing the story. We are the ones today who get to cry out in our wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord," for He will come again! We are told the end of the story sees Christ returning in glory, and Heaven descending to earth, and they shall become one. We are told all things will be made right. It will be a place of no pain, no suffering, no tears, and no fears. I do not believe that we will be whisked away to a far away place, rather, God will bring His creation to fulfillment, by Heaven and earth becoming one, that which He had begun in Eden. To do this, God has decided to partner with us. We are called to be God's associates, to help the story come to its grand climax. And this is what Paul means when he says, "the one who began the good work will complete it." You know that area of your life that has been troubling you? Remember this, God has not forgotten you, God has not abandoned you. God wants us to work with Him in finishing the story. God desires us to be molded, and transformed by His love, so that we too might mold and transform the world. And we do this, because we have first been loved by God, and like any great gift we have received, we want to share it with the world. The very world that so needs the gift of love, and, forgiveness. This is our advent story. It is the hope, that the work begun in us, and in the world, is not yet done. Amen.