

“Jingle, Sparkle, and Spice”

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

November 27, 2011

Put more jingle in your joy. Sparkle and save. Spice up your holiday with a new recipe! Create the perfect Christmas for your family with free shipping. All subject lines from my email inbox that stress me out! It's not enough to be happy. Oh no! I must have jingle in my joy. It's not enough to just use a coupon, but I must also sparkle while I save. It's not enough to just cook for the family, but I must try a new recipe to spice up the holiday. Don't just have a merry Christmas, make it perfect. December is not even here, and I feel behind.

I took a deep breath this morning when I walked into a sanctuary with the cool colors of blue and a bare contented tree standing in anticipation. That's one reason we come to church – to remember that we are in this world with all of its jingle, sparkle, and spice, but we are not of it. Never is that clearer, never is the distance greater between what is happening on the church calendar versus what is happening on the secular calendar than on the first Sunday of Advent. It's like trying to listen to two songs at one time – or even worse, trying to sing two songs at the same time. Think about that...WE struggle to sing one song at the same time! But, can you imagine if I asked this half to sing Away in a Manger and this half to sing Jesus Loves Me? At the same time. We would struggle – we would know the song we are SUPPOSED to sing, but what if the other side was louder? What if the other side had better singers? What if the other side had Chris? You would be out of luck.

That's what Advent is like – two songs vying for our voice. The secular world gives us a frantic fight song with an urgent message. Jingle, sparkle, spice and buy, buy, buy. Buy the must-have gifts for your friends or your loved ones. Make sure your bows are perfect, your tree stands straight, and your cards have the holiday postage stamp. And, buy some more. Buy gifts because you are expected to do so along with all the other stuff. Buy gifts to stay matched with the gifts you are given. Those things do prove your love, right?

How can the church compete with THAT – especially on the first Sunday of Advent? Did you hear the Gospel message? “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from the heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.” Seriously? If that is the hope that Jesus is offering, well, it is a hard sell when propped up next to all the promises of Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

But, in the end, it is the only hope that means anything – that Jesus will set things right – if you are hurting or sad or abused or oppressed or weary, he'll be back as Revelation tells us, “to wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” That has more power than Target's two-day sale. That hope can throw light into the darkest places of our lives. That hope that can send us soaring even higher into the joyful places of our lives. That hope winds its way through the shadows and it requires vigilance to keep, so that's what we do in Advent. While THEY are telling the message of jingle, sparkle, and spice, we come back to the nitty gritty– the message about a God who came right down to us 2000 years ago, who will come again for us someday, and who comes to us each and every day now if we only have eyes to see and ears to hear. We come back to the message about a God who is not content to just see us when we are sleeping and know when we are awake, but who shares life with us, cries when we cry, laughs when we laugh, and never

leaves us or forsakes us. We come back to the message about a God who loves us so much. He loves us just the way we are, and as they say, he loves us too much to let us stay that way.

That's what Paul was getting at with the Corinthians. Oh, our scripture selection has him all lovey dovey, but read the rest of his letter! He loves the Corinthians but it is a tough love. He socks it to them. The Corinthian church was a small church – meeting in homes. But, don't be fooled by its size – this church had plenty of prime time drama and angst ...and Corinth itself was like a biblical sin city - a port city with lots of coming and going and “special entertainment and companionship,” and then there was this group of people. They had heard the gospel message. They had believed. They had received the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit had blessed them with all kinds of gifts. If churches were classrooms, the Corinthian church was for the “gifted and talented.” It was not for the remedial students of the Spirit but for those who had already arrived - who had the stuff!

Sounds great, right? A lot of spiritual jingle, sparkle, and spice. The problem came when the gifts were more important than the giver – when the sparkle was more important than the spirit - when they tore off the wrapping, and without following the instructions, used the gifts for something else– like getting a treadmill as a gift and using it as a clothes line and getting into a fight about whether the sweater or the pants look best dangling from the handrails. For instance, the Corinthians had the gift of the gospel message given to them by Paul and Peter and Apollos. A good gift, but look how they used it. Instead of learning from these 3 different perspectives and these 3 different styles of leadership, they fought about which one was best. They had the gift of enlightenment, in particular, the enlightenment that set them free from all of the dietary restrictions – another helpful gift. Instead of appreciating this knowledge for its greater freedom, they used it to make fun of those who did not have it yet. They were given the gift of the Lord's Supper – the cup of salvation and the bread of life. Instead of coming to the Table with hungry hearts, they used this meal to fill their hungry bellies, and they gorged themselves on the food, while their brothers and sisters went to bed hungry.

They were more interested in the gifts than the giver. That is a dangerous spiritual place to be. One of the radio stations advertised its non-stop Christmas music with a woman's voice saying, “This is what puts me in the Christmas Spirit.” That's a shame, because if the gift of 24/7 Christmas music is what sets her spirit ablaze, she is going to be in a world of hurt on December 26th – the day the Christmas music dies! When we take to the hype more easily than the manger, we set ourselves up for a world of hurt. When we rely on things other than God to keep us hopeful, we set ourselves up for a world of hurt. When we look to the secular world to keep us in the spirit, for the grocer to wish us a Merry Christmas and by God, not a happy holiday, for the stores to pipe in feel-good tunes, for things other than God to strengthen our hearts and souls, we set ourselves up for a world of hurt.

My heart has been heavy this week. You will see the name Doug on the list of prayer concerns. Doug is a good friend – I shared office space with him for many years, and a few years ago, he played the piano here for some of our special night services. His daughter died unexpectedly last week. He sent out an email letting his co-workers and friends know, and he began that email with these words by the novelist Alistair Maclean - Even though the day be laden and my task dreary and my strength small, a song keeps singing in my heart. For I know that I am Thine. I am part of Thee. Thou art kin to me, and all my times are in Thy hand.

All my times are in Thy hand and a song keeps singing in my heart. That is the hope of Advent. It doesn't come from more gifts or more parties or a jam packed schedule every night. It doesn't come from Brenda Lee or Gene Autry or even Karen Carpenter. It doesn't come from

decorations like the Biltmore house or table arrangements like Martha Stewart. It doesn't come from the tv specials or the Christmas movies or the music that the stores pipe into our silence. It doesn't come from any of the jingle, sparkle, and spice that the world dangles in front of us.

During Advent, we are invited to slow down and to let some of that go – not to forsake traditions that we enjoy and things we love to do, but to forsake them as our boss. We are invited to slow down and feel what it means to say "...a song keeps singing in my heart. For I know that I am Thine. I am part of Thee. Thou art kin to me, and all my times are in Thy hand."

When I was in high school, I sang in the chorus and our Christmas concert was coming, and the pianist quit. So, I volunteered my mother to come play for us. We were to sing Bach's Alleluia from the cantata For Us a Child Is Born. It has a huge, hard piano accompaniment that flies like the wind – but my mother had been playing it for church choirs for over 25 years. When she arrived, she met the conductor and he thought he was dealing with some Alabama hick, and he was not particularly gracious. She sat down, asked him how fast he would like to go, and he sighed and said, "I guess as fast as you can play it." Wrong thing to say to my mother who has just a touch of diva in her blood. As fast as I can play it? Ok, and she let it rip to the point that the chorus burst into laughter at the fool she had just made of the conductor, and he realized he was in the presence of someone more talented than he, and he stopped her and almost apologetically said, "I need to begin again – maybe a little slower."

What about you? What might it mean to begin again maybe a little bit slower? What has to go first for you to realize that you are in the presence of the living God? What would it be like to not run through December hitting every note as fast as you can, but to join in the song "singing in my heart," to listen to God's music tumbling out of the heavens and into the dreams of a young girl and into the fields full of shepherds and into all of our lonely lives – Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy that shall be to all people.

I know, it is a hard thing to do. And, it's all right if we haven't figured out how to do it without coming across as a bah-humbug Scrooge, because that too is what Advent is all about. It's about figuring out how to hear two songs. It's about learning which one to sing. It is about preparing a place for something new in our lives. It is about preparing for new life in us no matter how forlorn we feel, and it's about giving our souls a chance to catch up, to hear the music over the jingle, sparkle, and spice, and to know that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift and we have been enriched by God as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is our hope. That is the hope that promises the advent of God himself to those who have prepared him room. That's the hope you can take to your grave.