



St. Andrew's
BY-THE-SEA
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
EST. 1928

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

NOVEMBER 29, 2020

[A Homily by the Reverend James J. Popham](#)

I observed several evenings back that our next door neighbor's front yard is adorned now by two illuminated, shiny reindeer. On the other side, three really quite lovely wreaths grace doors and windows on the front of the house. And just down the street, a hitch of inflated flamingos pulls a tin can trailer in the midst of a swarm of brightly lit reminders that Christmas is upon us. Except it is not even December yet.

It is in a way reminiscent of our time in Calgary, Alberta, where Christmas lights remained glowing in the night into February and even March. In Calgary, those lights were a beacon of warmth, which was very welcome at 24 below zero. But here in Destin, where 24 above zero would be a rare occurrence, these pre-December, actually even pre-Thanksgiving, Christmas decorations may just reflect a need for some joy and light in what has become something of a dark year, clouded by hurricanes in this part of the world - and the scourge of the coronavirus pandemic everywhere in the world.

Confronting these perils of the past nine months challenges us to remember who we are and what that means. It will be like placing the apocalyptic reading from the Gospel according to Mark in the aura of Paul's introduction to his letter in the church in Corinth. Dreadful and shocking things may happen, but as followers of Christ, we have a reassuring context to put them in. We need only maintain our orientation toward the love of Jesus Christ. Christmas is coming. Christ will come again. And as Paul exhorts the Corinthians, "He will also strengthen you to the end."

N.T. Wright, former bishop of Durham in England and a renowned Biblical scholar and writer puts it this way:

What [Paul] wants the Corinthians to get hold of most of all is what it means to have Jesus at the middle of your life, your thoughts, your imagination...If they can do that, all the other issues that rush to and fro ... will sort themselves out.¹

When we think about things, when we approach things, when we see things with a distinctively Christian orientation, we see the world around us differently. We find hope where others see only despair. We see abundance where others see scarcity. We offer forgiveness where others seek revenge. When we see clouds we search for the silver lining. When we enter a tunnel, we know we will see the light at the end of that tunnel.

We can look forward to 2021 with renewed hope. Hurricane season is over. Several pharmaceutical firms have announced promising trials of COVID-19 vaccines. We will need to remain cautious. And no doubt we will be impatient. But we know sometime in 2021, the masks will come off. Supermarkets will be as safe as our living rooms, and bars and restaurants will not be potential super-spreader sites. The six-foot chasm will be swallowed by hugs. The blue tape will come off the pews. We will gather again as the people we are.

And it is no less true that as followers of Christ, we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves and our unique, personal relationship with Christ. Paul says we are called into fellowship of Christ. And Paul uses a Greek word *haggios*, which literally means to set apart. We, as Christians, are set apart.

Several years back, we lived on a street where on a designated weekend before Christmas, everyone on our street would line the street with luminaria, those paper bags ballasted by sand with a votive candle inside. Everyone, that is, except our next door neighbor. She was a Jehovah's Witness. And they do not celebrate Christmas. So no luminarias in her yard, and the uniform line that stretched for blocks in each direction was broken. Maybe her courage in living according to her beliefs shone more brightly.

¹ N.T. Wright, "1 Corinthians," *Paul for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 2.

Should we wonder about our immersing ourselves in Christmas before and during Advent? Are Cyber Monday and Black Friday and who knows how many shopping days before Christmas eclipsing our time of anticipation and preparation for Christmas? Do our elaborate decorations and lavish parties reflect who we are or betray who claim to be?

But would Jesus really begrudge us a month-long celebration of his birth? Can we influence a culture we are not part of? Or must we be part of a culture, but not be influenced by it? How do we prepare for something in the midst of celebrating it? How do we celebrate something for which we have failed to take time to prepare? And if anticipation is half the fun, are we missing half the fun if we jump into the celebration without waiting?

In my early days as a disc jockey, I was reminded that I always was talking to just one person, no matter how many individuals were listening at any particular time. It is much the same with Jesus. Each of us is loved and addressed by Christ as if we were the only one. That's hard to imagine. But it is true.

Maybe we will find the answers to those questions about Christmas and Advent if we seek the wisdom the Christ who speaks to us individually in the depths of our hearts.