

Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas
December 2, 2018

We Christians know that the world fundamentally changed with the birth of Jesus, but there's a catch. The catch is that Jesus came to redeem human beings, so the changes have all occurred out of sight, inside human beings, where there's no 24-7, breathless coverage on cable TV news. The change is inside each of us, and that doesn't make for much news to anybody else.

That makes Jesus' coming a matter of perception. Herod didn't perceive any difference in *his* world – but the Magi were aware the world wasn't the same. So, were the shepherds and Jesus' own family. Are *we* aware?

So, Advent is the season when we work on those organs of spiritual perception that enable us to see the world as Christ has changed it. In Advent, we work on getting past the cynicism and world-weariness of Herod to join the spiritual adventure of the Magi and the shepherds. What will it take for *you* to see and believe that God has already transformed the world, *your* world?

You need to know that, as a Christian, especially in Advent, you're authorized to look into *yourself* to see what God's been up to, because that's where God's been up to something. Amazingly, you are just as qualified as St. Peter or Pope Francis or Billy Graham to serve as a place where the hand of God can be detected.

That's not as simple as it sounds. A lot of us are right there with George W. Bush who said he doesn't do that looking inside yourself thing. Others of us look inside ourselves with a hyper-critical eye and don't like what we see. Others of us approach self-awareness like a risk assessment project or a psychological resources inventory. Some of us are just full of ourselves. None of these are very helpful Advent tools for looking inside to detect God at work in our own hearts and minds.

Here's a different idea. One of the things I've discovered in retirement is that I can stop being preoccupied with all the racket in my head. I don't have to worry about Vestry meetings, middle of the night phone calls, leaky parish hall roofs, complaints about the acolytes or the music or the preaching, Senior Wardens who are sure they could be better clergy than I am and are happy to tell me exactly why. I don't have to live worried about the next three or four or five steps ahead I have to plan to anticipate trouble and head it off.

Hey, I'm retired. That makes life a lot different. I can settle into the present. I can be aware of who I am rather than how I have to perform. One of the things that has come back to me, about who I am, is to experience again how much a bright, hopeful soul I was throughout my childhood up until about age 15 when performance in school and on the job became overwhelmingly important. While that bright, hopeful soul has always been there throughout my life, I have tended to forget about it because other things always seemed more urgent. My soul kind of had to run on auto-pilot for most of my adult life, though I can see it more clearly now that I'm not so distracted.

What I realize I learned, in looking back over the years, was that I was able to get in touch with that bright, hopeful soul even when I was busy or worried or preoccupied, but I had to learn how, and I had to work at it. It didn't come naturally. I had to pray. I had to meditate. I had to set aside time. I had to still the racket in my head. I had to do what we're told we need to do in Advent. Be still. Let our soul come out of hiding. Let Jesus appear in that cradle of life's brightness that we call our soul.

For to truly know yourself is to know Jesus. To truly know Jesus is to know yourself. Get to know yourself, your soul, your conscious embrace of Jesus who is not anxious about tomorrow...the Jesus who loves the Prodigal and still cherishes his brother...the Jesus who prays for his enemies and forgives the woman caught in adultery...Jesus who walks on the really deep waters because fear doesn't control his reality...Jesus who sees to the heart of the Samaritan Woman, the rich young ruler, even to the heart of Peter, and loves them all in their confusion and their foolishness...Jesus who ultimately gave up his life to wake *you* up from the partial truths and outright lies you and other voices tell yourself just to get you through the day.

Know this Jesus and you will know yourself.

I invite you, this Advent, to take some time to get to know Jesus better.

Take some time. Be quiet. I really mean it—take the time. Be quiet. Set some boundaries around yourself.

Then when the voices chatter at you, thank them for the job they do. You probably do need them to get by. But just reassure them that, for this special time, they can be quiet, and you'll be OK.

And then be at peace with Jesus, and with that bright, shining self you've known has always been there from your earliest memories. This is a self most of us knew first-hand when we were two or three years old. But it's a self we regularly lose track of with all the noise in later life. Still, it's *there*, beneath all the foam rubber we've built up to protect ourselves from ourselves.

Be at peace with this self and with Jesus.

Discover how different you are from the daily chatter of voices in your head.

Then, from this place of peace at the center, look around.

And see if maybe God hasn't changed the *world* too, while cable news wasn't looking.

The Rev. David Hoster