

*Sermon preached at Trinity Memorial Church, Philadelphia; By the Rev. Edward G. Rice, Priest-In-Charge; November 29, 2009; 1<sup>st</sup> Advent Year C; Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1st Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36*

I have often wondered about how strange it must be for folks, particularly folks without a long history of attending church, to walk into a liturgically oriented parish on the Sunday after Thanksgiving and not see it all decked out in red and green or hear one of the familiar Christmas tunes every time the organ bellows forth. How in the world do they reconcile “Black Friday” with “Purple, now Blue, Sunday”? And what are those four candles about anyway?

In her new book, *The Case For God*, Karen Armstrong writes about human beings using two languages, two sets of vocabularies, to make their way through life and have been doing so since about thirty thousand years ago. [And by the way, if you do not have the time or inclination to read all 432 pages of that book, as I have, as yet, not had the time to do, at least borrow the book from someone long enough to read the preface. It is absolutely fascinating!] In the preface she writes about those two different languages. One is very practical and logical to describe the ordinary world in which we need to work to survive and thrive—figure out how to plant the corn, nourish it through the heat of summer, protect it from all that wishes to destroy it, and then harvest and preserve it until we use it to feed ourselves and our young. This is the world where careful observation and deductive reasoning are critical. All this is obviously very important even as it changes from age to age.

But as important as navigating that practical reality is, it is only part of the story, because that world has a limited ability to posit meaning and purpose to life. It is great for motivating us to produce, but limited in its ability to teach us how to share—or indeed teach us that if we do not learn generosity and care for others, life can be not only lonely but desperate. That practical world has a very limited ability to differentiate good and evil, or to explain why there is so much evil. And why do human beings have to go through so much hardship and suffering anyway?

We might say, and I am saying, that Black Friday and Blue Sunday represent the two worlds we live in, indeed, need to live in for a full, meaningful and joyful life---a balanced life.

Black Friday is about the material world, accumulation; it is about self and the smaller circle of our relationships; it is about happiness—the pleasure we experience from what happens; it is also about nostalgia, illusion, and exploitation—trying to convince us that going into debt for someone else’s benefit will lead to fulfillment. It can be short-term and superficial. Blue Sunday is about the other reality—we might call it the spiritual reality. It is counter-intuitive and often illogical, it is about the big picture, it calls for patience and is long-term. It is about longing for that which does not come quickly or easily—peace, love and justice. It is about the stranger and not just family and friends. Each Sunday the first reading will be from one of the Old

Testament prophets, not from Clark Clement Moore's "The Night Before Christmas." It is about a reality that we cannot create for ourselves but that comes as surprise and gift.

Enough theory, now a couple of stories.

When Harry Emerson Fosdick, the renowned 20<sup>th</sup>-century minister and preacher of Riverside Church in New York retired, he moved to Bronxville. But he still thought he had important things to say and do, so each weekday he would travel by train into the City where he kept an office. It did not take long before he noticed another commuter, who always caught the same train, who would pull down the window shade as the train passed 128th Street. Having observed this ritual for a while, and having gotten to know the man at least casually, Fosdick asked him why he pulled down his shade every morning at that particular place. The other man explained: "I was born in that slum and I find it painful to be reminded of those early days of my life. Besides, there is nothing I can do about the pain."

After a sympathetic silence, Fosdick responded: "I don't mean to poke around in your private life, but if you want to deal with your pain, you might want to begin by leaving the shade up."

Though Advent is ultimately about peace and hope and the joyful anticipation of those promises, it starts by lifting the shade and admitting the harsher realities of life.

I presume you noticed that both the lessons last week and this week are about the world, our hopes and dreams, our illusions of peace and safety coming to an end, being shattered in a big way. This is not so much to dash our hopes but to say that ultimately *we* cannot bring them about. They come from another place: they come from God.

Have you ever noticed that Advent comes *before* the winter solstice, not after it? Advent begins as it is getting darker and colder, not as it is getting brighter and warmer. Advent announces and proclaims that the light of God comes into the world at its darkest hour, and that the darkness cannot overcome the light of Christ—that we have to go through the darkness to reach the light. We cannot go around the darkness and still reach the light.

So Advent is like pregnancy and birth, the miracle of birth. New life comes only after a long wait and considerable discomfort and pain. We need to lift the shade if we want new life.

Advent is about yearning, longing for something. It raises the question about what do you most yearn for, hope for, stake your life upon.

In Dan Brown's novel *Angels & Demons*, the main character's father dies of cardiac arrest two days after his son's twelfth birthday. Young Langdon could

remember hearing his mother begging his father, just a few years before he died, to “slow down and smell the roses.” That year for Christmas, the boy bought his father the most beautiful thing he had ever seen; he bought him something, that when the sun caught it, cast a rainbow upon the wall. He bought his father a tiny blown-glass rose.

“It’s lovely,” his father said when he took it out of the box, kissing the boy on the forehead. “Let’s find a safe spot for it.” Then his father carefully placed the rose on a high dusty shelf in the darkest corner of the living room. A few days later, the boy got a stool, retrieved the rose, and took it back to the store. His father never noticed it was gone.

Langdon and his mother yearned for time together, special moments and deep and meaningful relationships. Their father and husband yearned for something else and placed his hope and security in a reality that could not fulfill those desires.

We are all, to one degree or another, distracted and numb from the frenzy of this world. Advent encourages us to slow down and experiencing the awe and wonder that is about us in God’s Creation. Advent reminds us to be patient and attentive to the ones around us who need our love more than they need our bows and tinsel and the newest electronic gadget. Advent is about being attentive so we can see God and that other reality breaking into the world in which we live and move and have our being.

The Advent candles help us mark time, anticipate what is coming. The prophets remind us that it is not just about us but about peace and justice for all. St. Paul reminds us that it is about love. St. Luke warns us not to get lost in worry, dissipation, and addiction in the midst of the busy, demanding world that is life, but to open our eyes so we may be aware of that other world from which come true and lasting peace, hope and joy. In the Name of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.