
Signs of Advent
Martin Grove United Church
November 29, 2015
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 21:25-36

And Jesus said, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.” Today, as we know, is the first Sunday in Advent. What are the signs of Advent? What do we see?

I confess that for me, it doesn't feel much like Christmas yet. I only had difficulty scraping my car once so far. And scraping the car is a definite sign of Christmas for me. It does help me get in the mood that our heating system is not currently heating the office side of our building though. Christmas decorations are up on our streets. I've seen the odd person walking around wearing a Santa toque. I saw a bow on a garbage truck this week. My family is having a bit of a contest right now, we are keeping track when we see a vehicle with the reindeer antlers and the red nose – the contest we are having is to see what type of vehicle tends use use the reindeer “costume”. My boys think it's mainly the SUV's that sport the antler look. They refused to believe me last year when I saw antlers on a Porsche!

If you are brave enough to enter a shopping mall, the retailers are only too glad to remind you of the fact that Christmas is coming, particularly with the “celebration” of Black Friday this week. Turn on the radio and you just might hear a Christmas song. I was in Canadian Tire this week and the store background music was an actual Christmas Carol, and while I was listening to the words to see just how politically correct the store management was, I even heard the word “Christ” used as a reference to Jesus. Imagine that!

Of course, a lot of the messages we are hearing now are a bit mixed. I also received an email flyer from a large retailer, and the subject line was “Great gifts to make them ohh and aah!”, just nicely devoid of any sense of why we might be giving gifts in the first place. And most stores in the mall do not really announce the coming of

Christmas so much as they announce Christmas buying and Christmas sales.

We are in fact bombarded with messages about Christmas - even in our society today. Long after Canada has ceased to be what we might have called a “Christian Country”. But even now, the voice of Christmas speaks to us in different ways.

We all have our own “angle” on Advent. We have different memories of Christmases past. We have different ways to express our own sense of joy. And we have our own ways of expressing the sorrow and grief that we find at this time of year too.

And I find it fascinating how our stories of Christmases past are an interesting blend of the religious and the social - the sacred and the secular. Growing up in Saskatchewan, I never saw any conflict between the religious and the social aspects of Christmas. We had Jesus. We had Santa. What’s the problem? Because I knew that the reason that Santa came delivering presents was because he was so excited about the birth of Jesus. In my mind, the stories blended together just fine. Or to be more honest, I really never thought about it. I never had to think about it. And of course, I liked presents!

We also know it's Advent because as we wait for Christmas, we hear familiar voices. Here's one voice: “As fall turns to winter across this nation, many millions will converge on centers of worship, large and small, to celebrate, and give thanks, to a familiar God. This God tells us to buy now, and pay later. This God tempts us with promises of endless credit, as this God leads us down the path of eternal debt.” So at least says the famous “Reverend Billy”, in his movie, “What Would Jesus Buy”. Rev. Billy, if you don't know him, is an actor, but his character claims to be a minister in “The Church of Stop Shopping”.

The Church of Stop Shopping is what you probably think it is. It's a group of people whose driving ideology is that we North Americans spend too little time in faith centres and too much time in shopping centres. And for Reverend Billy and others, that message comes to a real head at this time of year, because in North America - shopping and Christmas are usually seen as strongly linked together.

Now don't get me wrong - giving gifts is one way that we share our love with

each other. But I'm sure we can all think of cases where the gifts themselves became the reason for the season. And that is tragic. Particularly today.

One reason why some people are critical of excessive Christmas shopping is that it drives many people into debt. In the words of one mother in the movie *What Would Jesus Buy*, “[Christmas] is not a bad holiday, its just that you go broke.” But what else can we expect when we live in a culture that tells us that it would not be Christmas without expensive presents. Perhaps it is time for that particular tradition to be changed.

Another reason why some people are critical of excessive Christmas shopping is the idea that the money spent on Christmas – even just the money that is spent on products that will be in landfills long before the spring thaw - could be used for better purposes. For example, today, the estimated cost to provide safe, clean drinking water for every person on our planet is \$13 billion. This year, it is estimated that Canadians will spend well over \$35 billion on Christmas. That means that if we redirected half our our Christmas budget to creating clean water - the global drinking water problem would be solved. Imagine that. And imagine if other countries adopted the same strategy and solved other global problems like malnutrition and illiteracy. Just imagine how much brighter the future of our world could be in only a few years! Now that would be the advent of a new world.

But of course - we are products of our culture. We like nice things. We like gifts. Of course we do. We do live in a consumer culture after all. Besides, it's our cultural tradition to celebrate Christmas with presents and debt. Surely a tradition like Christmas doesn't need to change - does it?

On Tuesday we will have our first session of our Advent Discussion Groups. And we will discuss Advent of course. I don't want to spoil the surprise for anyone, but of the many things that we will discuss and learn about, one thing is that the celebration of Christmas – the celebration of the birth of Jesus - does not have roots in the early Christian Church. To the early Christian communities, Easter was very important, but Christmas was not important at all. Celebrating Christmas at all is an example of a changing tradition.

And celebrating Christmas on December 25 is in itself an example of changing traditions. There are actually a number of theories as to why we celebrate Christmas on December 25, but many scholars agree that December 25 was chosen as the date to celebrate the birth of Jesus long before the Christian community had enough political clout to create a new holiday. So the Christian community latched onto an existing holiday, December 25, which was a Roman holiday to celebrate the birth of the invincible sun god. That's sun - as in S-U-N. A tradition about the sun was transformed into a tradition about a son. It's too bad that the Romans didn't speak English, because they missed out on a great pun. But in any case, the tradition we call Christmas was a modified version of an even earlier tradition.

Even in more recent times, there was a time that stockings, and Santa Clause, and Christmas trees were new ideas. There was a year when Silent Night was first heard. Traditions evolve. Even traditions like Christmas. Traditions evolve because the meaning behind the traditions continue to be re-interpreted in new ways.

Traditions are meaningful if we can engage with the symbols. That's how we find a connection between the traditional story and the story of our own lives. I can say that Advent is a time of waiting for the birth of baby Jesus - but this is not really what I have in mind. [show baby Jesus] How do we engage in and with the nativity story? As we move through Advent this year, I encourage all of us to pay attention to the signs of Advent all around us. And I encourage us to share our own stories of Advent with each other.

And Jesus said, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near." Look for the signs of Advent all around us. Let's open our minds and our hearts to see Advent in new ways. To seek the baby Jesus in places other than just in a manger.

Amen.