

The Second Sunday of Advent
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December 9/10, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79
Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

So. . . are you done with your Christmas shopping yet? Did you take part in “Black Friday”? Are you one of those folks who went out to the Hershey Outlets so you could be there right at midnight on Friday and get all of the good bargains they were going to have? Or maybe you showed some restraint and waited till 5:00 a.m. to get into Circuit City. Of course, though, there are those, apparently, who took part in “Black Monday”, which is the new consumeristic passion for on-line shopping; Monday following Thanksgiving is now apparently a big time to be on-line, although I can’t imagine getting any special breaks for logging on at 3:00 a.m.

Now we’ve been bombarded with sales and fliers since before Halloween (and we have to say Halloween, we can’t say “All Hallow’s Eve” or “All Saints Day” or even “Reformation” because most of the general public don’t know what those days are). And I have to admit that I am not done myself. I have started, inasmuch as I know what I’m going to get Marianne, and we’ve talked about what we’re going to get our children. We’ve ordered the stuff for my folks to be sent them down in Florida, and we’ve gotten the stuff to send off to my sister and her family out in Wisconsin. But I do have to admit that I tend to concentrate mostly on Marianne more than anyone else during this time, because we celebrate Christmas on the 25th, our anniversary is on December 29, and her birthday is January 8, and I very quickly learned if I don’t have all my ducks in a row, I’m sunk. So I need to plan ahead and get prepared.

Now, we do try not to be too extravagant with all of our gifts, partly because we don’t have a lot of extra funds, but also because we do like to show some restraint, some common sense, and realize that this holiday is not about “stuff”. It’s about the celebration of the birth of the Christ. It’s about preparing for the coming of the Messiah.

We can go and make mistakes, and sometimes even believers can get tripped up with our consumeristic passions. Let me give you a real life example from my own life several years ago. My friend Mark and I both happened to move to Connecticut about the same time. Mark met and married a wonderful woman, Debbie, who had a child from a previous relationship. The first Christmas they celebrated together as a family, Mark confided in me that he and Debbie had gone shopping at Toys R Us and as they were pushing the cart down the aisle they kept saying, “Oh wouldn’t Michael really like this?” or “Oh, let’s get this – we can all play it together!” and by the time they got to the checkout counter and were ready to pay, the total damage to their wallet was over \$500. And you need to realize that this was in late 1980's dollars, so \$500 would buy more than just the latest X-Box edition! I would have thought that they might have shown a little bit better common sense.

But that’s really, I think, what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Church at Philippi – common sense. Alright, it doesn’t translate that way in our lesson today, in verse 9, “And this is

my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and **full insight** . . .” that Greek phrase used there, “full insight” – discernment, common sense. Now maybe this also might sound a little hypocritical for Paul, because he does start off his letter with a bit of hyperbole as he says “I thank God **every** time I remember you, **constantly** praying with joy in **every** one of my prayers for all of you . . .” Okay, Paul really likes the congregation at Philippi, and that’s a fine thing. He really liked the congregation at Thessalonica that we heard from our lessons last week, as well. But he wants to encourage that congregation to use their discernment, to use their common sense in how they deal in everyday life, in how they deal with each other.

Another thing I have learned, though, is that common sense is not necessarily all that common. But I do need to ask – have you used common sense lately? Maybe you have, and that’s great. Hopefully in your Christmas shopping you’ve shown a little bit of restraint. Now please understand that I am not in any way, shape or form trying to say don’t give gifts this season, I’m not a Scrooge; that’s not at all what I’m talking about here. I do hold on, though, to the idea that it’s better to give than to receive, and supporting charities like Lutheran Disaster Relief, and the Heifer Project, or Habitat for Humanity, or even National Public Radio . . . those are all good and fine organizations to support and well worth our time and effort to work for. But we’ve got to use some common sense in what organizations we support, and to whom we give money. We need to be careful and considerate about what we give and to whom, because I think one of the interesting things about this letter to the Philippians is that the folks Paul is encouraging to support are not the ancient equivalent of Lutheran Disaster Relief or the Heifer Project; no, those folks Paul talks about supporting, the ones in need, he’s talking not about the people in the next town over, he’s talking about the folks right here, this congregation.

We are reminded in our other lessons – get ready, prepare, because the One is coming. The savior, the Messiah, is coming. As we go out and do our Christmas shopping, as we write those end-of-year checks, whom are we supporting? Why are we doing it?

Now, I will say that the whole idea of giving is very much gospel related. Remember that whole thing that Jesus says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”? Love your neighbor – not the charity a couple of states away, love your neighbor as yourself.

Remember my friends Mark and Debbie? I know – you didn’t have any kind of personal relationship with them, I can talk about them this way because I haven’t seen them in years – that first Christmas that celebrated as a family, they invited me over. Debbie came from a large family (there were like 400 of us in a two bedroom Cape Cod house), but Debbie’s family is also well off, so not only did Mark and Debbie spend \$500 on their son, Michael was also the youngest of all the grandchildren, and so he had this pile of gifts that was twice as tall as he was. And I contributed to it, though I will say that being a Youth Worker at the time I didn’t have a whole lot of money to spend on an extravagant gift for Michael, but I did try to think like a five year old (which some of you probably think is not all that difficult for me to do) and I asked myself, what would a five year old like? Well, I bought him some comic books, and a box to keep them in. By the time I got there, he had already opened a half ton of presents, so we ate our meal and he still had more presents to open, which he was unwrapping without a whole lot of enthusiasm (can you imagine a kid on Christmas day not being too enthusiastic about

unwrapping more presents?). Finally he got to the end and I have him my gift, which he opened it, looked at it and said, “Oh, a box”. I said, “Michael, open the box.” He opened it and looked in and (I’m not trying to pat myself on the back here) his face lit up and he shouted “Comic books!” and much to his mother’s chagrin, he spent the next half hour ignoring this huge pile of toys and reading all the comic books.

What is it that we want? What is it that we need? What is it that others want? And what do they really need?

We’re getting ready in this time of Advent. We’re preparing; we’re making the roads straight; we’re leveling off the hills; and filling in the valleys – we’re preparing to celebrate the birth of the Child. We’re preparing to celebrate the return of the Messiah. But as we prepare, and as we wait, let us use that full insight, let us use that common sense. And remember, it’s not about what we want, it’s about what we need.

Amen.