

Advent I, 2018
Psalm 25; Luke 21.25-36

OK, folks, it is “Name That Tune” time. What is the name of this song, and who is singing it?

Help!
I need somebody.
Help!
Not just anybody.
Help!
You know I need someone!
Help!

Do you know the song and the group who sang it? I realize, those of the Sixties Generation have an advantage. The song is “Help!” sung by the greatest band of all time, The Beatles.

So what has this got to do with Advent? The words of the song are quite appropriate for this day. Advent begins with a cry for help. The Prayer of the Day for this Sunday sets the tone for the beginning of Advent:

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come. Protect us by Your strength and save us from the threatening danger of our sins....

This makes Advent quite a counter-cultural observance. In the culture, it is party time. The celebration of Christmas has already begun, another go-round of our annual end-of-the-year orgy of self-indulgence. It is a holiday season, but without the holy-days. It is Christmas without either Christ or the mass. (I heard a version of the “Little Drummer Boy” carol completely stripped of any reference to Christ. “Baby Jesu” is just “little baby”; “Mary nodded” is replaced by “mother nodded.” The carol, like much of Christmas observance in our culture, has been thoroughly secularized.)

But while our culture is busy having a party, the Church takes a much more somber view of things. Advent begins with a cry for help. A new Church year begins, not with a festive party, but the candid admission that not all is right with our world and with us. We stand in need of deliverance. We prepare for the birth of our Savior and Lord by admitting that the world, that we, are in need of salvation.

“Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come.....save us from the threatening dangers of our sins....”

That is right: to save us from our sins. We are part of the problem of the darkness of this world. We need salvation, and what we need salvation most of all is for ourselves. Our sins threaten us. So part of the work of Advent is taking stock of ourselves, examining our lives in light of the truth of God. We will hear in Advent the call: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” It is a call, as an Advent hymn exhorts, for every life to be cleansed from sin, to repent and turn to God’s ways; to “fit us for heaven,” as a Christmas carol puts it, because, as we are, we are not fit for God’s company.

From what do we need deliverance? We need deliverance from all the evils that tempt us to sin, because it is so easy to give in to them.

We need deliverance from our own egos. None of us is free from what Martin Luther called “the heart turned in on itself,” from the drive to make ourselves #1 and everyone else second. We need to be freed to turn our hearts outward to others in love and service, to be a blessing in this world.

We need deliverance from the hatreds that infect human hearts, especially those of racism, anti-Semitism, of tribalism in all its forms.

We need deliverance from the dark desires of the subconscious mind, what an old order of confession called our “secret thoughts and desires which we cannot fully understand, but which are all known to God” and are expressed in the seven deadly sins: anger, envy, lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, and the root sin of them all: pride.

We need deliverance from the petty jealousies and resentments that poison our relationships with others, that reside like a cancer within us, depriving us of joy and peace.

We need deliverance from deceit, from hiding our actions under a cloak of secrecy, evading the light of truth and refusing to take responsibility for our words and deeds, and scapegoating our unhappiness on others.

So Advent begins by praying: "Save us from the threatening dangers of our sins..." An Anglican prayer for this day asks God to "Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light..." Our Advent prayers are for the chance to make a new start with a new heart cleansed from sin to walk in righteousness.

We call this chance for a new start "forgiveness." It is a gift of biblical religion to the world. In my reading this week, I came upon this comment on the power of confession and forgiveness that is God's gift to the world in Christ:

A new and powerful instrument of civilizational change had been born. For the roots and resolutions of the small and great social conflicts do not occur first and foremost in parliaments or palaces, but in the secret recesses of [our] souls, from where all injustice arises. It is on this secret battlefield where the struggle with temptation to sin, the enemy *par excellence* of a truly human civilization, rages. It is here ... that the keystones of a just social order are laid or destroyed.

We look to politics, thinking it will save us. But our politics only reflects our deeper spiritual and moral sins, or virtues. In the end, we get the leaders and government we deserve.

Advent begins with a cry for help. We need somebody, and not just anybody. We need someone But the theme of Advent is not despair because of our sins, but the hope of deliverance. So Luke's Gospel today encourages us: "Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is near." Help is on the way. Advent announces that someone has come, is coming, and will come again. That someone is the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

The popular notion of Advent is that it looks backward to the coming of Christ in His birth. But, in fact, the focus is not only on the past, but on the future - on the second coming of Christ to judge the living and the dead and establish His eternal kingdom of love.

This calls for us to exercise the sacred virtue of patience. Advent is about as "counter-culture" a season of the Church year as you can get. We live in a world of instant gratification. Every day you and I are bombarded with messages that appeal to our most basic animal instincts: food, power, sex, pleasure, fear. The motto of our age is that song: "I want it all, and I want it now."

Advent, in its theme of hoping, praying, and waiting for God's coming, is just the opposite of this.

Some years ago, a church member gave me this little coaster for the cupholder in my car. On it are printed the words: "Jesus is coming. Look busy." And, we are very good at being busy, especially at this time of year. Too busy, in fact. So it is for many people that when December 26 rolls around, their comment is, with an exhausted sigh, "Thank heaven, Christmas is over." When, in fact, it has just begun - for the Church, that is.

I think the words on that coaster would better read: "Jesus is coming. Stop. Look. Listen." No spiritual practice is more needed for peoples' lives today than a healthy, robust practice of the disciplines of the Advent season: waiting, watching, patience. It is a season when less is more. So take a break from the distractions of our world. Turn off the TV news and listen to the Gospel, the Good News of Christ Who came, Who comes, Who will come again for us and our salvation.

Help!
I need somebody.
Help!
Not just anybody.
Help!
You know I need someone!
Help!

Stir up Your power, O God, and come. Come to save us, most of all save us from ourselves.

Stand up, raise your heads. Your redemption draws near. Someone is coming to save us: a child sleeping in the night. He will bring us goodness and light in the darkness of this world. Amen.