



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Ryan Hall, Curate  
Sermon for Fourth Sunday of Advent  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
December 23, 2007

“You're Stupid, Charlie Brown!”

[Isaiah 7:10-16](#)

[Romans 1:1-7](#)

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

[Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18](#)

You ever have one of those days where you feel like you can relate to good old Charlie Brown from the Peanuts cartoon when Lucy proclaims that, “You're stupid, Charlie Brown!”?

I have had one of those weeks, starting with that ice storm we had. Jerry called early that morning and said the office would be closed. I was like “Yeah! A snow day!” And then it was pretty much all down hill from there. I had to drive my fiancée to work in the snow, so I went out to my car and it was encased in a block of ice.

While trying to chisel the door open, I broke the latch on the car door, so I had to bungee cord it to the handle on the inside. That was a cold ride, let me tell you. In the driveway of my fiancée's house, I fussed at the lock for about an hour as ice was pelting me in the face. I never did get it fixed, but I did suddenly understand why Dante's *Inferno* viewed the lowest level of hell as a frozen plain.

After giving up in disgust, I went inside and accidentally broke a lamp. To console myself, I opened a bag of Chex mix, only to accidentally pour half of them on the floor. And then when I was sweeping up that mess, a mouse, which had apparently come in from the cold, ran across my foot. Nasty.

After that I pretty much went into the dining room and put my head down on the table. I figured I could not break anything that way. And then on Thursday, I was downstairs bagging some food for the food pantry. I needed a bar of soap, which is at the end of the wooden shelf there. In my exuberance to get done, I leaned over and whacked my head a good one. I think I about knocked myself unconscious. I hadn't been hit that good since I was playing football.

As I was sitting there, dazed, realizing I had blood on my forehead, I think I literally said out loud, “You're stupid, Charlie Brown!!”

Of course I know I'm not stupid, but it sure was one of those weeks where I felt like it. I am not exactly sure why Charlie Brown came to mind at that exact moment, other than it's Christmas time and maybe instead of seeing stars I was seeing little Charlie Brown's Christmas trees as I sat half dazed on the floor and bleeding.

When I was growing up and occasionally going to church, I could always sympathize with Charlie Brown because I always felt a little stupid. I never understood exactly what Advent was. Maybe I didn't go to church enough and always missed the Sunday when the Sunday school teacher handed out the secret Advent decoder rings, but it was seriously not until I was in college that I figured out what Advent was supposed to be about.

Christmas in secular culture has largely become this gift giving frenzy which begins after Thanksgiving and ends at midnight on December 25<sup>th</sup>. But really as liturgical Christians, that is not really what the season of Advent is about. Since it is the last Sunday of Advent, but not quite Christmas, I have had a few questions from parishioners this week concerning why we do things the way we do in Advent. In lieu of a more traditional sermon this morning, I thought we might take the time to look at some of the traditions of Advent that we hold in the Episcopal church - because they are very symbolic and have so much to teach us. We have a very rich liturgical tradition and I think sometimes we, the clergy of the Episcopal Church, fail in explaining and passing on our heritage.

The two major things that you notice that are different in the chapel are the altar frontals and the Advent wreath.

You will notice the altar frontal and the stole and chausable that the priests are wearing are *purple*. You also might remember that during Lent, the colors are purple as well. In Advent, we use a darker or Royal Purple. Lent is more of a reddish purple. In fact, in some churches, the move has been to move to a Blue to differentiate Advent from Lent.

The term Advent comes from the Latin (*Adventus*) translation of the Greek word *parousia* which is a theological term which refers to the second coming of Christ. Advent was started (probably around the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries) as a 40-day period of fasting exactly like Lent. Just as Lent was a preparation for Holy Week and Easter, Advent was originally a period of fasting and personal reflection to prepare one's self for Christmas, the coming of the Christ child.

Purple was historically used for both Lent and Advent because purple was the color of the royalty. We set out the purple in anticipation for the coming of the King (or originally the Emperor). Purple was the imperial color. Bishops likewise wear the purple because it is the imperial color. As tempting as it is to critique that custom of the Episcopate, I won't chase that white rabbit.

You also may notice the Advent wreath. And if you have been here before for the 10:30 service during Advent, we have had some of the young people explaining about the meaning of each candle before the lighting of them. I would like to thank all of the young people who have been doing that, as they have done that very well.

The Advent wreath is both a relatively recent liturgical item and a very ancient one. The greenery wreath item goes back to pre-Christian times, when Germanic tribes used wreaths with candles as a sign of hope in the dark days of winter. Of course, when Christians came on the scene, they adopted the wreath and gave it Christian meaning.

The greenery, of course, represent spiritual growth and understanding in much the same way that we use green in altar frontals and vestments during what we now call the Season after Pentecost (it used to be called the Trinity Season) which goes from the end of May until Advent I in December. The church year starts over again with Advent.

The circle of the wreath has likewise always been used as a symbol of the Trinity. A circle is infinite just like God is infinite. In fact, if you go over to our sister church here in Lincoln, Holy Trinity, there is a large cross above the Altar with a centered circle. That's because that was a symbol of the Trinity.

While wreaths of various shapes and types have been a part of Christmas for hundreds of years, what we now think of as the modern "Advent Wreath" (that we have a perfect example of here) with the greenery up on a stand with 3 purple and 1 pink candles, really was not perfected until the early 1839 in Germany. And as with most things that are used in liturgy, it was started for a very practical purpose.

Basically, the form we now use as the Advent Wreath was started by a man named Johann Hinrich Wichern who was tired of his children pestering him every day in December by asking if it was Christmas yet. So, he went out to his barn, got an old wagon wheel, put it on a stake and put candles around the rim of it, 1 big candle for every Sunday and little candles for every other day of Advent. This way his children could look at the number of candles burning and know how many days there were until Christmas.

That was a lot of candles, so as time progressed, it was just the 4 candles for the 4 Sundays of Advent. Some modern Advent Wreaths have a white candle in the center and others don't.

Depending on whom you ask, Christians have slightly differing meanings on the candles. Some traditions have names for the candles, in fact. The first candle being the Prophet's candle for the hope of Jesus' arrival. The 2<sup>nd</sup> candle being the Bethlehem candle, reminding us that God loves us so much that he appeared as a humble man, the 3<sup>rd</sup> being the Shepherd's candle, reminding us of their Joy, with the 4<sup>th</sup> being the Angel's candle, representing peace and good news.

Depending on which tradition, some of the virtues are attributed to different candles, but the Advent themes of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace are usually there in some way, shape, or form.

One of my favorite questions to ponder about Advent, and the issue I will leave you with to think about and meditate on as we approach Christmas Eve, is the reading from today's gospel. One of my favorite questions about Advent was also about this reading we got today from the gospel,

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel,"

That's really nice. You see it a lot on Christmas cards...but if you really want to ponder it, there is something a bit wrong here. Joseph doesn't really name this baby Immanuel. He names him Jesus. They don't call him Immanuel at all in the rest of the gospel. What's up with that?

Some people prone to conspiracy theories believe that what this means is that the writer of Matthew is trying to "pull a fast one" by proof texting enough from the book of Isaiah to draw in the reader and then hope no one notices that Jesus is in fact not named Immanuel.

I don't personally hold that view. I hope the writer of the gospel was not deliberately trying to be intellectually dishonest. I think by quoting that passage from Isaiah, Matthew is telling us what he believes Jesus actually is, not literally what he would be named.

If you remember a few months back, I preached on the Lion that we have outside in the courtyard, because the Lion was traditionally the symbol of Saint Mark, because Saint Mark portrayed Jesus as the King (the best debater, the best miracle worker, the best preacher), and a lion has long been held to be the King of the Beasts. John was an eagle, and Luke was an Ox.

Matthew, which we will largely be reading this year in the lectionary cycle, is often depicted as a winged man largely because of this particular passage we read today. Jesus might not be literally named Immanuel, but to Matthew, Jesus literally is "God With Us", but in every other sense, Jesus is the incarnation.

One this Sunday before Christmas Eve, let us give thanks for this rich tradition we have been given, with symbols that point us to the coming of this God which was made man. In the remaining hours we have left in Advent, let us ponder those symbols and meditate on what it means to have a God who was born like as we are.

The purple has been set out. The King is coming...Amen.