

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, it is coming soon! Our Lord Jesus comes with power in humility, with strength in weakness, with Godliness in humanity. We welcome the King that is the Christ child, with all of the paradox this idea provides. Help us, in this season of Advent, this season of tangible anticipation, to prepare faithfully, living in the Lord's example. With your help, we prepare our hearts for newness of wonderment, joy, and curiosity like a child, for our idea of preparing is often bogged down with responsibility and self-imposed pains. Oh God, we lose the joy and wonderment in trying to live out unfaithful expectations. Help us, God, when we lose the ways of Christ in trying to find our version of Christmas.

Although the season is joyous, we also find the gravity in the season's meaning. We await with joy the Christ Child, but the Christ Child also brings responsibility. The Christ Child brings newness and fear, for the Christ Child brings change. As the world changes to welcome the coming of Christ, help us to welcome the Christ. Help us individually, God, to grasp the joy of our life in Christ. Help the church, God, not to settle for the comfort of belief but strive for the challenge of living like Christ. Help us not to hold onto those things that constrict when the Lord calls for freedom and justice. Help us not to worship our image of Christ when only the real Christ will do. We pray all these things in the name of the one coming very soon, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one people...

SERMON

I know that many of you remember our special Guide Dog pup Phantom. Well, Phantom will not be joining us at Faith anymore. Phantom, right before Thanksgiving, was deemed to have behavior that was not guide dog appropriate, so he was, by the powers that be, "career changed." This is just another way of saying that he will not become a guide

dog. On the one hand, this was hard for us to hear. We worked so very hard to prepare him to go to Guide Dog school and had such great hopes that he would become a great companion to someone who really needed him. On the other hand, I see it this way: our pup Phantom has found his true calling. God may not have created Phantom with the intention of becoming a guide dog, but he's going to be an awesome companion for his new family. We as Phantom's raisers delivered him to his new home yesterday, a home with a family who want a dog so badly, and we all know that this new complete family will love each other very well. So, Phantom has entered his new phase of life with new expectations. He will no longer have to live out the minutia of every guide dog action. He will no longer have to wear the vest or live the great discipline of the guide dog life. He can be a free dog with the life of a companion. So, to us, we are passing on our little friend to a new family, which is sad but, at the same time, joyful, for it will uplift all involved, dog and family. To Phantom, with all the behaviors and responsibilities he has become used to, everything has changed. His responsibility is now to be just the best darn puppy he can be. To him, this great adjustment can be viewed as nothing short of a regime change.

So, what is a "regime change?" It means that the previous way will not be the future way; everything will take a different direction. We have been trained to hear it with a negative, violent sense. We hear it in terms of political change with a violent overthrow of government. This is not what we are talking about here. We hear it with the firing and hiring of sports coaches and administrations. It just happened with the Nebraska Cornhuskers; Bo Pelini's employment ended and they hired Mike Riley. I'm hopeful this will be a positive regime change. But this is not a sermon about government or football...as much as I know you all want to hear about these subjects. Here we are talking about

something much greater than the change of employment or the setup of a government. Jesus Christ's coming signals the change of everything...and I literally mean everything. We can no longer think of our humanity in the same way. We can no longer think of God the same way. We can no longer think of creation the same way. With our scripture lessons, we can see the term "regime change" take place in two ways: the personal and the public. Let's look at the Gospel of John to see how John the Baptist's example leads us to personal change and Mary's speech from the Gospel of Luke shows us how God calls for a better world in the coming of Christ and our role in making that happen.

Our first scripture lesson this week comes from the Gospel of John, telling John's slant on the coming of John the Baptist. It is more detailed than the account from Mark we heard last week, but this telling has its own intention. According to the podcast Sermon Brainwave, the Gospel of John has one main focus: affirming that Jesus Christ is the light of the World, the Messiah, the Son of God. With that in mind, John's message is clear: he is not the focus. The focus is the one yet to come; John is merely paving the way for the next one whom he is not qualified to untie his sandals.

John's example and the Gospel of John as a whole show us one central theme of this season. We need a personal regime change just as much as the world does. The bottom line is a simple idea. Are we pointing to Christ? The answer may be much more complex than you'd think. One can easily go to church every Sunday. One can say they believe in Jesus Christ and follow him. But the other side of the coin is what others see. Do we really point to Jesus Christ with our lives? Sometimes, we don't do that as well as we'd think.

When I was young, I remember at every meal, we watched a lot of the same things. One of those shows I watched growing up I didn't know how to appreciate until I was

older...that is the Korean War comedy M*A*S*H. I imagine many of you had the experience of watching this show. It is, of course, about Army Doctors doing the best they could in the struggles of war. It was never easy, but you saw the real humanity of the cast in those dire conditions. Each character brought his or her own flair to the camp, but the one character that consistently stands out is Major Frank Burns. He consistently read his bible and told everyone how much he believes in it. At the same time, he criticized everyone around him. He's telling everyone how they don't match up to his superiority, and for that, he is ridiculed. Why believe him when he says he loves Christ and follows his bible when he's doing everything against the spirit of scripture? On the other hand, the 4077 has Father Mulcahy, the chaplain. He believes in the same things that Frank so espouses, but everyone in the camp treats him with respect. His words mean something; he is seen as a true representative of God and Jesus Christ. What's the difference? The way they carry themselves. Frank carried himself as someone who knew all the answers, who could tell everyone what they needed to be doing. He held the rank of Major and treated everyone under his command like they were subordinates. But, at the same time, he did not live up to his lofty ideals. Where Frank would boss around everyone, Father Mulcahy would lift up everyone. In the final analysis, they both had lofty titles, but it's how we use our positions.

We can translate the same idea to us. How are we pointing back to Christ? Are you being a Frank Burns? This is the type that says they believe in Christ and says all the right things, but there's no joy there. There's no kindness for the neighbor. There's no focus on spreading the Love of Christ, just a lot of rules. When someone does something a Frank Burns doesn't want them to do, they get angry, telling them to change or going to their friends to gossip about them. This is someone who believes in Christ but does not do very

well following Christ. On the other hand, there is Father Mulcahy. Whether you are Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, or pick your denomination, the spirit remains the same. The Mulcahy is the one who spreads kindness and joy. There is no lasting judgment; there is companionship and urging one another to grow. If we find ourselves in the Frank Burns camp, it is time in this Advent to reorient toward the Light of Christ and seek a regime change. Only with a heart of love and kindness can we receive the Christ Child.

God's vision goes beyond us; it extends to the world around us. The second scripture lesson comes from the mouth of Mary, the soon-to-be mother of Jesus, and can be considered nothing less than God-inspired. Its message is so integral that we revisit it every Advent. She is visiting her relative Elizabeth, the soon-to-be mother of John the Baptist, and something miraculous happens. Mary greets Elizabeth, and when Elizabeth hears the greeting, the child inside Elizabeth jumps for joy. Mary responds with this short but powerful speech called the Magnificat. It's a beautiful monologue that affirms the coming of Christ and how God's ways come to being through Christ's coming. It is, put simply, the vision of God's worldwide regime change.

What does that regime change look like here on the ground? This regime change is what Christmas, the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh of a human being, is truly about. It is putting everything on its head. God comes as a little child. The coming is announced to the lowliest of the lowly, the shepherds, first. In that manner, Mary speaks a similar message: God's ways involve scattering the proud. Bringing the powerful down from their thrones. Lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry, sending the rich away empty. We believe that Christmas is about peace on earth, but peace cannot exist by itself. This is the other half of peace: justice. This is not simply the justice of the courtroom; God's justice means that all

of God's children get what they need: physically, emotionally, spiritually. Everyone deserves to be cared for, especially those the world does not care for whatsoever. That is what Mary's speech tells the world.

This regime change has a lot of similarities to the first. We need a regime change in the greater church. I've heard a lot of people say "if everyone just believed in Jesus, everything would be perfect." Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be the case alone. It's too easy. Just look at the church today. We all believe in Jesus Christ, but there is little unity. Among Jesus's followers, there is not a lot of peace. In every circle of the world, Christians do not agree. We argue about a lot of things, from big ideas to the smallest pieces of doctrine. And yet, all these people believe in Jesus Christ. These are not examples of everyone believing in Christ; they are examples of what living like Christ looks like. Believing in Christ and living like Christ are not two different things; they're more like steps one and two. In this season, we hear all of the usual noise about "remembering the reason for the season." It has become overused to the point of losing its meaning. The reason for the season is not just Christ but Christ's mission. Jesus' message to the world wasn't just "believe in me," but "follow me." The second is harder than the first. I challenge that we need not only believe but LIVE like Jesus Christ to find the "reason for the season."

Scripture backs it up deeply. I'm struck by the words of James, always timely and challenging. "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder." Even the demons believe, but they are far from faithful. Christmas, starting with us, the Christians, needs a regime change, and it begins with following Christ's example. I've seen this statement many times on Facebook;

it truly strikes at the heart of the matter: “Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the Hungry, Clothe the Naked, Welcome the Stranger and the Unwanted, Care for the Ill, Love your Enemies.” In other words, walk in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the 3rd chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks to the Corinthian church saying that they were still infants in Christ; they had to still keep feeding on milk, for they were not ready for real spiritual food. My friends, in this time of Christmas when the regime change is coming, the church needs to progress from drinking milk and moving to the real spiritual food. Believing in Christ is the easy part, where we start with faith. That is the milk. Growing in faith, we need the spiritual food. That is when we learn how to live like Jesus Christ, and that is how we continually prepare the way of the Lord, this season and beyond. It starts with us, the church. It’s not as simple as blaming the world for not accepting the mission of Jesus Christ. We can criticize the world all we want, but until the church fully lives the mission of Christ out, the world will not know the Glory of our Lord.

Regime change. We aren’t talking about a hostile takeover but a loving change that honors the living God. We need it ourselves; the world needs it. Our hearts can be oriented toward checking off lists, toward following rules, toward enforcing the laws of God, but when they are, then we have lost the point behind all of it. It’s about spreading the loving kindness of Jesus Christ that restores all people. It’s not just believing in the Lord Jesus Christ; it’s living our belief in a world that doesn’t believe that Jesus Christ is worthwhile. When our beliefs and our actions come to being, the world can welcome the Regime Change of Christ that will transform every heart and every structure to glorify him. Until that time, we wait with joy, we prepare with anticipation, we keep lighting the Advent candles until our hope becomes sight. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.