

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Romans 15:4

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Imagine if God promised to be at a certain place at a certain time, and to take and answer questions, and to answer all that He felt were pertinent to our daily lives and salvation, all that He thought we needed to know here and now, all that in the end it was good for us to know at this time. Imagine if God came down from heaven and promised to speak to us, where we were at, in the midst of the various circumstances of our lives, and to enlighten for us a paths of hope, to set forth for us guidelines for more peaceful, contented, and blessed lives. Just imagine. What do you think would happen? I think there would be quite a line, wrapping around the block and more. People, even people who have never thought much of or about God before, would be at the very least curious to hear what He had to say. It's not every day one gets to listen to God, after all. Or is it? St. Paul writes, ***“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”***

Why is it that we would be so eager to attend God's presentation, to listen to Him speak, to ply Him with our questions and receive His answers if He were to appear at the local multiplex or shopping mall, yet we are so slow to attend to God's presentation in the Bible, to listen to Him speak through the writings of the prophets and the Apostles, to read His Word and to hear it preached, and to do so with an eagerness to hear what He has to say, and with an expectation to find answers to all that He feels is pertinent to our daily lives and salvation, all that He thinks we need to know here and now, all that in the end it is good for us to know at this time. You don't have to tell me, or raise your hand, or answer out loud, or anything, but when was the last time you really dug into God's Word with the determined expectation there of hearing God, of framing your life within its light, of finding in them God's will for your life, His encouragement in the midst of obstacles, His admonishment with respect to your spiritual failures, His counsel for our strained relationships, His remedies for our sins? If you can remember the last time, good, but as you remember it, consider if you gave the Word its due as you mined it, if you gave it the attention you would give God Himself if He were sitting before you.

In a few weeks, we will watch as angels, shepherds, and wise men find our infant God wrapped in swaddling clothes and resting in a manger, begotten of the Father from eternity but now born as Man in time. Unfortunately, while we in our hearts and minds return to Bethlehem in that holy season to greet Him, we cannot do so in person, for that time has passed. We were not blessed to be born in that age. We have been blessed to be born in and bless another age as salt and light. Yet we must still, like those shepherds and wise men, find the Christ where He may be found. Through preaching and teaching, shining forth His presence like that Epiphany star, we should have no problem figuring out where to look. Christ is right here for us to greet Him, already in this Advent season, wrapped not in swaddling clothes, but in the promises of God, resting not in a manger, but in the Scriptures. Yet I have to wonder, in the new year soon to be upon us, what will we receive with more interest in this new year, the photo directory, as much as it will be useful, or the Bible, the good news of great sales in New Year's advertisements in the newspaper or the good news of Jesus Christ in the Gospels?

When you read church history, it is hard not to be thankful for the Church Year and the liturgy. Even in the darkest days of Christianity, these two things, the Church Year and the liturgy, have helped to preserve a remnant of the faith. Why? Because the Church Year takes us through the life of Christ, so that, as a bare minimum, those who attend God's services become familiar with the key moments of Christ's ministry, with the fundamental feats of our salvation, and because the liturgy is little more than a collection of biblical verses, actions, and songs, so that, at the very least, those who attend God's services are walked through the heart and core of the Christian faith, from the confession of sins, to the Lord's model of prayer, to the Sacraments, to the benediction. Yet the Church Year and the liturgy, while excellent delivery mechanisms for the staple foods of the faith, need not be all that we digest. God has prepared a whole feast, sixty-six books of truth to chew on, and why should we deprive ourselves of all that extra nourishment as well? That's why we have Bible classes. That's why, thanks to printing technology, we encourage every Christian to have a Bible, and not just to have one, but to put some cracks in its binding.

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” We are in Advent, the season of watchfulness and preparation, the season of making straight the way of the Lord, or readying our hearts to receive Him. And while lighting candles, and putting out wreaths, and draping the altar in blue provide wonderful symbols and teaching tools in this time, ultimately the best and surest way to realize the purpose of Scripture is not further or more difficult than grabbing His Word and opening it, or to listening while one called to do so opens and explains it for us. Christians are children of God, but they are begotten by and through the Word, joined with water in Baptism, proclaimed to us in Absolution, sermons, and instruction classes.

Allen Iverson, a former Piston, now a Philadelphia 76er again, once had a famous press conference where he downplayed the importance of practice. This is part of what he had to say: If I can't practice, I can't practice. It is as simple as that. It ain't about that at all. It's easy to sum it up if you're just talking about practice. We're sitting here, and I'm supposed to be the franchise player, and we're talking about practice. I mean listen, we're sitting here talking about practice, not a game, not a game, not a game, but we're talking about practice. Not the game that I go out there and die for and play every game last it's my last but we're talking about practice man. How silly is that? ... We're not even talking about the game, when it actually matters, we're talking about practice.

Now, while it is true that great basketball players like A.I. and myself might be able to get away with not practicing and still put up crazy numbers in a game, that's not usually the case. When something really matters, you get ready for it. You put in the time to be prepared. How much you value the end goal is made clear in how much you put into the getting yourself in shape for the achievement of it. As Christians, our end goal is Christ's return and the salvation of our souls, and God has given us the Scriptures so that through time in them, through diligent effort contemplating His message to us, through daily practice of His counsel in our lives, we might show how important that end goal, that big day, the Last Day, game day, so to speak, is to us.

No, God might not show up at the local multiplex or the shopping mall to field our questions and instruct us, but that doesn't mean He isn't here for that purpose. He is no further than His Word. As those forgiven through the death and resurrection of His Son, the Christ Child born to die for our sins, be eager to hear Him this Advent. Listen to Him as you would listen if He were standing before you, because He is before you, Jesus Christ wrapped and resting in the Holy Bible. ***“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*** Amen.

