

We are half way through Advent, that season in which we prepare for the birth of Jesus, the entrance of God into our world. At this point in the Advent season I always find myself struck by the dichotomy between how we Americans celebrate Christmas and the reality of that first Christmas.

The Christmas season in this country has become a call to spend, spend, spend. The season from Thanksgiving to Christmas is supposed to be a time of family and friends, a time to focus on the important things in life, and a time to reflect on God's vision for this world. But instead it is now a time when we are encouraged to overindulge in every way possible even when this overindulgence means we keep families from being together because we make them work nonstop so that we can shop 'til we drop. I personally am haunted by the scenes on the news of thousands of shoppers rushing the stores, pushing people over, camping out all night, running up massive credit card bills, buying more than anyone could possibly need. Eat, shop and be merry seems to be the point of the Advent and Christmas season. But what on earth does any of this have to do with the birth of Christ? What on earth does any of this gluttony have to do with God loving us so much that he became one of us that we might find true life, true love, true peace, and true happiness?

Now, lest you think I have developed a Grinch-complex, I have not. It is wonderful to find just the right gift for someone you love. There is something unforgettable about giving another person something that is just right for them. There is also nothing wrong with sharing good food and good times with those we love. And when these things remind us of God's love for us and help us grow in our relationship with God, they are very good things indeed.

But Jesus was not born to increase Target's or Best Buy's or Walmart's bottom line. God did not come into the world as a little baby to save the economy. God became human so that we could know God better, so we could come to better understand that God's vision for the world is very different from the world's vision for itself.

This vision is what we hear John the Baptist proclaiming to us today. "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

The kingdom of God that John announces that is coming to us with the birth of Christ is what life would be like on earth, here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Annas, Caiaphas, Reagan, Clinton, Bush, Obama--none of these powerful rulers will bring in this kingdom. It is Jesus, the son of God, through which this kingdom will arrive.

But entrance into this kingdom requires a counter-cultural choice. It requires that we live not by the rules of this world--spending, consuming, getting ahead at all costs--but instead that we live by the rules of God's world--loving your neighbor as yourself, taking up your cross, giving rather than receiving. Entrance into this kingdom requires repentance from each and every one of us.

Now repentance is not an easy word for most people. As a matter of fact, I suspect that most people would say that for them repentance has mostly negative connotations. For most people repentance means feeling self-hatred, feeling bad or pious sorrow. But true repentance isn't about feeling bad at all. True repentance is about feeling good. True repentance is about letting go of those things that are weighing you down, keeping you from knowing true peace and true happiness. When you repent you turn around, change directions choose a different path, and make a radical rupture from your old ways of seeing, doing and being. God calls us to repent, not because God is a control freak with a bunch of arbitrary rules that we must follow. God calls us to repent and live life in a new way, because God knows that it is only when we follow God's way and not the way of the world that we find true fulfillment in life, true peace, and true happiness. God calls us to repent for our own sakes not for His.

So, I challenge you during the last two weeks of this Advent season to step off the holiday treadmill. Take a break from the calls of the world to consume more and more. Indulge just a little bit less. And in the time you would have spent shopping or eating or whatever sit quietly for a few moments and ponder these questions:

- How is God calling you to prepare for the coming of Jesus into the world?
- What difference does Jesus' entrance in the world make in your life? Does it make any difference at all? If it doesn't seem to make any difference to your life, why is that?

- Where in your life do you need to repent? Is God calling you in any place in your life to let go of your old ways of doing things and to live your life in a new way?
- What is really important for you this holiday season?
- What will bring you true joy and happiness this Christmas?

God came into this world to save us from ourselves. The world teaches us that happiness and peace come from spending, owning, consuming, and getting ahead of others. But at some point in all our lives, we come to see the lie in all of this. True happiness, true joy, true peace comes from none of this. God came into this world as a tiny helpless little baby born in a backwater province to a family with no power to show us the source of true happiness and peace. God came into this world to show us how to truly live. May these last two weeks of Advent be for you a time of preparation for Christ's birth. May they be a time when you come to better understand that Caesar is not lord or god, and neither are all the other many false gods—money, possessions, power etc. May it be a time when your paths are made straight and you are able to prepare a space for the birth of the Messiah into your own life. May it be a time when you come to experience the peace of God which passes all understanding.

Amen.