

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Brooks Cato

A few days ago, I was on Facebook -- why, oh why do I keep going back to that cesspool? Anyway, I was on Facebook, and I came across a friend of mine who was complaining that he'd received a postcard from our beloved boarding school that wished warm greetings and a happy new year. My friend was grumpy about this because the international institution catering to all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds, religious and not, this institution sent out a card that said happy new year instead of Merry Christmas. And apparently this was an attack on Christendom and the downfall of society is now nigh. Now, being the liturgical snob that I am, of course I mentioned that a card that says "happy new year" right now actually is a super Christian thing, regardless of anyone in the alumni office realizing what they'd said. Happy New Year is Advent. Boom. Christian. Of course, I was also a bit miffed that he thought this international institution should send out a Merry Christmas card to all the alumni regardless of their own religious background. Of course. There are about a bajillion, give or take, religious celebrations this time of year, and this guy's claim reeked of spiritual hubris.

But, I gotta say, the thing that really rankled was the insult this guy felt over it. Now, I should probably step back for a second and just say that I typically try to leave other people's emotions and their right to them be. But also, the outrage over the supposed "War on Christmas" does not exist in a vacuum, and this particular fellow was hitting all the requisite talking points. To be clear: the extension of warmth and grace to people of all religious backgrounds does nothing to harm Christianity. It might actually be one of those things we are called to do. Jesus and Paul go to great lengths to extend the love of God through Christ to the Gentiles, and by extension, we've got a lot of love to extend to *everyone* around us, too. And we do this because those other people, whoever they are, are people deserving of God's and God's people's love. But this fellow that got so mad about the postcard? He lives in a worldview where Christianity is under fire, directly threatened by the recognition that other people do things differently than him. And he's so deep in that place that even a well-intentioned postcard from a beloved institution feels like a dig.

Here's the thing. Christianity cannot be taken down by a postcard. And if we fear it can, we've got some serious soul-searching to do about what we believe God to be. But this isn't new, right? Coffee cups have been a major culprit in recent years, and yet, we're still here. Christmas trees popping up in big box home repair stores in September are probably up there, too, and yet, we're still here. The Church no longer holds a position of privilege and authority in the US, certainly not to the degree it did 60 years ago, but guess what? We're still here.

Actually, there was a time when Christianity very much was under attack. In the early days, Christianity was a subset of Judaism, and the established religion thought we were crazy. As it turns out, all of our scriptures were written while we were being persecuted by one group or another. All of 'em! Before Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, we were the target of a great and sprawling edict that put our lives at risk. Pledge allegiance to those gods, or meet the sword, the stake, the starved beast before jeering crowds. And yet, we're still here. But in the 300s, a major shift happened. Christianity went from the mess a centurion would scrape off the bottom of his sandal to the last breath conversion of the emperor himself. Christianity became the religion of the entire empire, suddenly at home in the halls of power. And yet, we're still here. The problem is, or rather, the challenge is, we continued to use the same scriptures that had been written by an oppressed people even as we held the highest of earthly powers. Fast-forward to my friend and his apparently iconoclastic postcard, and I hope you can see the problem. Christianity is not under attack, not here at least. We live in a country that is an international superpower, and our halls of power claim to be religion-free but are far from it.

Christianity and weird things masquerading as Christianity are as present in those halls of power as polished marble and paintings of dead white guys.

So what are we to do? I suppose where our scriptures are concerned, we have a few options. The first is to just ignore the bits that make us uncomfortable, and the second is like unto it: get rid of the bits we don't like altogether. Neither of these options are really on the table. Because they are our scriptures and millenia of Christian life, miracle and misstep, are centered on them. We owe it to our forebears, those who actually were under threat, those who gave their lives for their faith, those who gave up position and power and influence for what was right, we owe it to them to take these things into our heart. And we owe it to the nonreligious people of today to be responsible for what we say we say. So that leaves us with option #3: actually read this stuff, actually learn it, and actually deal with what those many verses hold. It is not always pretty, it's sometimes deeply challenging, it's even often the last thing you'd want to read or hear or do. But it's our scripture and as Christians we are accountable to it. The fun thing is, though, the more you do this with integrity, the more you see what a different world we live in -- and what a similar world we live in, too. We take Christianity for granted. Isn't it kinda cool that Home Depot and Lowe's and Wal*Mart find it profitable enough to start stocking Christmas decorations annoyingly early? I mean, do I like it? Nope, not one bit. It's Advent, dangit! But our Christian ancestors could never have imagined a world that so embraced Christianity that the marketplace itself would come to hold its symbols.

Back to my friend with the postcard and his grumpiness over the apparent downfall of Christianity. Y'all. If Christianity could survive the martyrdoms, the manhunts, the millennia of infighting, the temptations of power, the misuses of power, the awful headlines, and the many teapot tempests it has so far, I think we're going to be ok. Because when we really get down to it, our faith is not in other people to set things right, it's in God. Sure, we have things we need to do, but our faith is in the God of all things. Postcards got nothing on us.

Now that's all well and good, but we're not done just yet. There's one other thing we need to talk about, and it's a doozy. Postcards and coffee cups are easy to talk about. It's pretty clear to me that that's a nonissue. Christianity is not under siege or facing erasure because some corporation thinks changing their wording will bring about some extra end-of-year mammon.

But there is a place we should be facing up to. And as we sit in this Advent Season waiting for Christ's comings and preparing the way and refining our precious silver faith, the time is ripe. There is something masquerading as Christianity in this country, and it's begun to seep further into the world. Quick caveat: if you think I'm talking about big-E Evangelicals, you're close but not quite. Big-E Evangelicalism has it's issues as far as I'm concerned, but most of them are trying just the same as we are. But there's something that hides in Christianity in nearly all of its expressions including ours that's mighty troubling. And that's the obfuscation of Christianity and patriotism. To be clear, it's fine to love your country. Probably a good thing, even. But this current nationalistic Christianity conflates the two in the worst possible ways. It has adopted a perma-oppressed mindset of Christianity as a political endorsement of taking back what's, in their eyes, rightfully theirs. The thing is, while we are called to "render unto Caesar" and whatnot, we are also "citizens of heaven." Put differently, you are not a citizen of Heaven because you are a citizen of the United States of America. It is a great danger to convolute the two. God does not seek the halls of power. If you go back to those many scriptures, God repeatedly shows up as far from the halls of power as possible. From Egyptian slaves to conquered exiles to a soon-to-be family of three tossed into the stable out back, God comes into our world where power is missing to bring freedom in place of oppression.

I could go off on this soapbox for a lot longer than anyone wants to listen, but if there's a point to all this rambling, it's this: with God's help, our job as people of faith is to serve God, and the most consistent way our scriptures show us to live that out is bringing hope and help to the oppressed. The First Chapter of Isaiah makes

this loud and clear: “Learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed.” But tread lightly. Because the fruits we will bear depend on just how faithfully we define who the oppressed actually are. To misidentify the oppressed is nothing short of belittling the truly oppressed, and often, furthering their oppression. But to get it right, to get this right leads us to the true depth of our faith.

This year, as postcards and coffee cups and rage-inducing talking heads try to tell us what to get angry about, listen instead for the voices that aren’t amplified, the ones truly at war with a world that holds them down. Because it’s there in their cries we’ll hear that still, small voice, the voice crying out in the wilderness, the voice preparing the way. And if we listen to that voice, if we listen to them, they won’t lead us to kings and princes and presidents. They’ll lead us straight to God.