**Confession or Confection?**

**Text: Psalm 25:1-10**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**First Sunday in Advent**

**December 2, 2018**

We all know the story of How the Grinch Stole Christmas. Let me tell you about how the downtown department stores really did. Prior to the late 19th century, Advent and Christmas were very different seasons than they are now. Advent, of course, is the 4 week period leading up to Christmas. It is the season of *preparation* for Christmas. Traditionally, it has been a time of prayer and reflection; a time of inner purification so that one’s heart is made ready to cradle the Christ Child. But beginning about 1900 this long tradition was blown out of the water when the whole period from Thanksgiving to Christmas was transformed into one big shopping and party fest. The Thanksgiving Day parades were a big part of this. They were created by the big city merchants to get people excited about going into their stores and spending money. Think about it: The Macy’s Parade in New York, the J.L. Hudson’s Parade in Detroit, the Eaton’s Santa Claus Parade in Toronto, the State Street Parade sponsored by the stores in Chicago’s Loop: these were all department-store sponsored events that turned Thanksgiving Day into the start of the Christmas shopping season. Next these same merchants turned their toy departments into massive fantasy lands during that 4 week stretch; and their windows became moving mechanical winter wonder lands. All this was designed to stoke our materialistic desires. By the 1920’s Advent had lost its penitential nature and Christmas had been turned into a commercial extravaganza.

 But it hasn’t always been this way! So I want you to imagine that you are sitting in a gothic cathedral in the 16th century. It’s December. The gathering gloom of the coming winter grips both body and soul. You’ve come to the church to pray…

*David Tahere sings Veni, Veni, Emmanuel; verse 1*

There are others scattered about this sacred space: confessing their sins, longing for forgiveness; aching for the assurance that Christ is returning, that the evil world will soon be swallowed-up by the Kingdom of God.

Advent is a thin place; where the Sacred Presence can move with ease across the boundary between time and eternity, and a hurting world is reassured with grace and hope.

Advent is a time to be touched by this Mystery. It is a time to prepare a room in our hearts for the Savior. In the Christmas carol *Joy to the World* we sing: “Let every heart prepare him room…” The image is that of the Bethlehem inn, where there was *no* room for Mary and Joseph. But we don’t want to be like the Innkeeper, banishing the Holy Family to a stinking stable out back. So Advent has traditionally provided a space to do that work of inner-preparation for receiving the Christ Child; a time of making room in our hearts for Jesus. It’s a time of cleaning out all of the junk the fills-up those inner spaces that ought to be filled by Jesus, so that he can be born anew within us.

And there is *so much junk* that needs to be cleaned out. For example…a few weeks ago Helen said to me, “I’ve got this tune in my head and I can’t figure out what it’s from; I think it’s an old t.v. show.” Let’s see if any of you can recognize it (but if you’re not at least 50 years old you can take a nap for a couple of minutes). Here’s the theme:

*Hum old t.v. theme*

Give up? It’s the Smothers Brothers’ Comedy Hour. Now, Helen and I could’ve racked our brains for hours trying to figure that out. It could’ve messed-up our whole day if we’d let it. As it was, we tried to let it go, but it kept coming back. So I’d suggest the name of a show and Helen would Google it, but each time her computer played a different theme. Finally it came to us, and a few quick Google clicks confirmed it; but the point is that our hearts and minds are filled with all sorts of silly stuff that takes up space that ought to be filled with more important things. If it’s not old t.v. jingles than it’s sports or food or money or possessions; or perhaps it’s traditions or programs or practices that perhaps once were useful but have long since lost their practicality. We cling to these things. Perhaps they’re okay in moderation but sometimes they take on a God-like quality so that what matters *most* in my life is watching my favorite show, or my team winning the big game, or making as much money as I can, or showering my grandkids with a gazillion Christmas gifts, or perpetuating that church program that long ago ceased filling a need or feeding the soul. These things are spiritual junk food. They’re like candy for the soul; confections for the conscience; holly-jolly fluff that fills the room that God has reserved in our hearts…for Jesus.

Confession helps. Introspection is instrumental in the clean-up process. We all need to look within from time to time and identify those things that are cluttering-up our hearts. Identify them and talk them out and pray them out and ask God to purge us of whatever it is that is preventing us from fully appreciating the joy and the love of Jesus, who is knocking on our hearts and asking to come in. Sometimes you just have to name them: name the junk food and the silly stuff and the trivial things that are bloating our spirits and taking up so much of our time and energy.

I had one of those moments of confessing and naming and truth telling a week ago. Over Thanksgiving I allowed myself to get sucked back in to football; especially college football; especially the Michigan-Ohio State game; aka, ***The Game!*** I’ve got Michigan roots on my mother’s side and dear friends with Ohio connections and in my youth the Michigan-Ohio game was a *big* deal. I haven’t paid nearly as much attention to it in recent years, but last week I reverted; I backslid. It was Michigan’s year to win the game – on the road no less – and have a shot at the National Championship!

Ohio State clobbered them. 62-39. I was still grieving the next day.

Father forgive me, for I have sinned. Not because I watched a football game, but because I infused it with God-like importance. In the grand scheme of things, football and fancy decorations and cherished traditions and getting lots of Christmas gifts matter not. Not even *baseball* matters all that much! And the more we cling to such temporal realities, the more we set-up ourselves for trouble.

Suffering comes from attachment. Suffering comes from clinging to things that are destined to pass away. This is a Buddhist insight, but we hear echoes of it in Christianity. Suffering comes from clinging to relatively insignificant things that will someday be no more. We cling to them as if they are eternal, when in fact they are temporal. We grasp them hard and hang on for dear life; and then they turn to dust in our hands and we fall to the ground, and it hurts. We attach ourselves to things that are tangible – things that are seen – when in fact scripture calls us to place our hope in that which *cannot* be seen (Romans 8:24-25). It is that which is intangible and eternal: faith, hope, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness – these realities and the Holy Ground in which they are rooted – it is these that form God’s tapestry, and the eternal background to God’s grand drama.

My challenge to you this Advent season is to take some time – out of your busyness and your social engagements and your family festivities – take some time to be still: here in this sacred space, or in a place reserved for prayer at home, or wondering as you wander out under a wintry sky or down a forest path. Be still and think about those things that occupy so much of your time and energy and passion. Those things that seem so important that you’re reluctant to let go of them. Do you get defensive about them? Do you feel angry or threatened if someone is critical of them? Are they things that Jesus would do? Are they things that help you to serve the One who came to bring abundant life to *all* people? Do they feed the soul? Do they energize you or drain you? Do they help you to experience the mystical magic of God-with-us? These are among the questions that I would encourage you to ask yourselves; and each other. This is the kind of introspection that may help you let go of some of the spiritual confection of the season, and some of the clutter of your life, so that you can prepare room in your heart for the One who is coming: in the thin place that is Advent. Amen.