

To Bring Justice

From the series: Waiting For Messiah To Come –

Text: Isaiah 11:4; Luke 1:52

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Advent, December 8, 1996

Transcription of the spoken sermon

The lesson from the Hebrew scripture is Isaiah, chapter 11. Let me be clear this morning. I'm going to be asking you to engage with me in some thought about the meaning of Advent. I am not so much making claims as inviting you to think with me about the traditional ideas that are associated with this season and what we ought to be doing about it. The bold print in your bulletin says "Waiting For Messiah To Come," the smaller print, "To Bring Justice." Waiting for Messiah to Come - that is the posture of Advent. Waiting for Messiah to Come. And then, when he comes, to bring justice.

It's going to take us all of Advent and Christmas, and you're going to have to stay with me because I probably can do no more than raise some consciousness this morning, but what I want to try to do in this season is to take a fresh look at this Advent expectation. In a word, I'm going to suggest to you that it's time we stopped waiting and started doing something about it. I'm going to suggest to you that for us to wait for Messiah to come to bring justice is to miss that which has been revealed to us so clearly - justice is not something that will come at the end of the line that Messiah will bring.

The Call to Confession this morning was from Micah 6:8, "The Lord has shown you what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." We have that embodied in Jesus. So, it is not as though we don't know, and it is not as though we do not have the resources. It is that we lack the will. I simply want us to think about that in this Advent season.

Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of the Lord. Now, we are not preparing to go to Bethlehem. We are preparing for the End, the end of history, the consummation, the Kingdom of God - that's what we are preparing for. Advent is a sober season in which we are reminded that we will all be called to give account of our lives before the Judge of all the earth. Advent in the Christian Church is not anticipation of the miracle of Bethlehem; it is anticipation of the End when the one who was born in Bethlehem comes in power and glory to judge

the nations. That is the Advent theme. It's awfully hard to squeeze it in, to get a word in edgewise for Advent in the Church. This is not the Christmas season, in spite of appearances. The Advent theme of the final consummation of all things is to be considered in these four weeks prior to Christmas, and then, on December 24 in the evening, we can begin to celebrate Christmas.

I take my life in my hands and I live with some peril. We haven't sung a Christmas carol yet. Some of you get downright testy about it. You really wanted "Jingle Bells" this morning, didn't you? But, you see, the Church has its own calendar and I think the Jewish people are a distinct people after all of these thousands of years because they live by their own calendar. What is it - the year 5757 or something like that on the Jewish calendar? They live according to their festivals and their seasons quite apart from the rest of the world.

We have a calendar, too. There's nothing divine or inspired about it, but it's a calendar that sets out for us seasons, the rhythms of life, moods, foci of concentration, and to live by that calendar is to be shaped by those ideas. In the shaping, we are also able to distinguish ourselves from the culture at large.

The culture at large has co-opted our day, eh? The commercial interests have backed Christmas way up on the other side of Thanksgiving. It was the 16th of November when Nancy and I went to Bethlehem at Radio City Music Hall. We've already been to Bethlehem! Fantastic, spectacular program, Rockettes and all. But, a Christmas show on November 16! How in the world do we ever get a word in edgewise for Advent and for the serious contemplation of that which lies before us at the end? We're waiting for Messiah to come. The Jewish people are waiting for the messiah, too, except they're waiting for Messiah to come the first time. They say to us, "Messiah has not come."

We say, "Jesus was the Messiah."

They say, "No, you've got to be wrong."

They may be right, because Jesus did not claim to be Messiah. It was his followers who said, "That was the Messiah." But the Jewish people - after all, you know, we get the idea of Messiah from their book - they tell us quite rightly that the idea of Messiah coming was to issue in the peaceable kingdom. They say Messiah hasn't come. Look at the world - it's full of war and violence and destitution and poverty and all that's wrong. When Messiah comes, all that's wrong will be made right. There will be a total transformation of everything. Messiah, obviously, hasn't come. We say, "Well,... yes he has."

But, we have to be honest. The whole New Testament, which is not a Christian book, folks; it's a Jewish book, you know. It's about Jesus, a Jew, written by Jews who had been nurtured in Jewish expectations. They encountered Jesus and they said, "That's the one!" And the only problem was he was crucified, and the world wasn't transformed, but they expected it to be transformed. They knew the vision;

they knew what Isaiah had spoken, that he wouldn't judge by what his eyes see or what his ears hear, but he would judge according to truth. They knew that he would decide with equity for the meek of the earth, and the consequence of that would be that the wolf and the lamb would lie down together and they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain, that beautiful Messianic dream. Those who encountered Jesus and who experienced Jesus said he's the one. They knew that dream. We read in the Gospel lessons and *The Magnificat* was also sung:

He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones. He has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away.

They said Jesus was the one. But, Jesus was crucified. "Ah," they said, "but he lives. We experience his living presence; he's with God, enthroned in glory, but he's coming, he's coming soon. Just wait; just watch; hold on." Acts 3:19: "Repent therefore and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through the holy prophets."

They were living on the edge. They shared a general cultural expectation of the end of the age, and they believed that Jesus was the Messiah; they had not expected that detour of crucifixion and resurrection and ascension, but that Early Church, this whole New Testament document written about a Jew by Jews was posited on the supposition that the one who had come would come back very soon. That's clear.

Now, 2000 years later, we still read the beautiful Messianic dream of the prophet, we still hear *The Magnificat* sung, and we get into Advent and we get into our prayers and our rituals and our hymns and our liturgical formulae and we sort of go through it, never, I think, stopping to think that, when we wait for Messiah to come, we are really copping out of what should be obvious to us and incumbent upon us - that Messianic dream that we read and love and that *The Magnificat* that we hear, that speaks the language of the underdog who is praying to God to reverse things, turn the tables, change things around. I think our problem in the Christian Church is that we have an underdog religion and we've become top dog. Just think about it for a moment. Listen to *The Magnificat* again - "He has thrown the mighty off their thrones. He has raised up the lowly. He has fed the hungry and he has sent the rich empty away."

Who are they talking about? They're talking about us, folks! We have taken over the religious yearning and expression of an underdog people and now we who are the dominant, powerful, affluent people of the world are still waiting for Messiah to come to do justice! We're waiting for God, and I think God is waiting for us!

"For have I not showed you what is good and what does the Lord require but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

You see, that Messianic dream was Israel's dream, little Israel, that little piece of real estate at the end of the Mediterranean Sea, buffeted about by all the world's empires - they had chutzpa! They thought that God had chosen them; they considered themselves the navel of the earth; they were battered about by Assyria and Babylon and Persia and Greece and Rome, and the prophets of Israel, living in an occupied nation, in a conquered nation, being the pawn of the power brokers of the earth; yet they had a dream. They had a dream one day our God Who has called us will exalt Mt. Zion and all nations will flow to Mt. Zion and we will teach the world Torah. We will lead the world to God. We have been called by God to be a beacon to the nations. Is that chutzpa, or not? You bet it is! Here they were, this little people, and they had a dream. They said "One day it's going to be different than it is. One day Messiah's going to come, and the whole earth will be wrapped in beautiful peace, and we'll teach the whole earth to walk in the ways of our God."

Then into that little community into which Jesus was born, poverty-stricken, occupied, down-in-the-mouth, poor, poor society, comes *The Magnificat*! It is a song of an underdog people. It is a song of a people who are oppressed, who are poor, who are hungry, who are saying, "God, when are you going to make it right?" And they saw Jesus and they said, "Aha. That's the one." But, then he died. They said, "Ah, but he lives. He'll come back; he'll come back. Come, Lord Jesus. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus. Do it! Do it, do it, because if you don't do it, it is so awful. This human condition is so terrible, the darkness, the darkness. Do something!"

And here we are, affluent, well-fed, well-dressed, comfortable, Christian people 2000 years later, and we say, "Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus. Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus." We don't even understand what we're praying. For us to pray the *Magnificat* is to take the oppressed and the underdog's song and to say, "Lord, throw us down. Lord, throw us empty away." I suspect that if it would ever get through to us, we'd have to say, "Ah, I guess we shouldn't be waiting for Messiah to come."

I guess we should be about the transformation of the world. I guess we who have so much power and so much resource and so much knowledge and insight and Wow! We ought to be about changing the world, because the dream, the dream is there." Rabbi David Hartman says that Messianic dream - that's not the end of history. That is the critique of history in every moment. That's the plumb line of God that measures every historical period. You reach that dream and you measure your own day by that dream and you will see how out of sync it is, how crooked it is, how full of injustice and oppression and inequality. You measure your society, 1996, Christ Community - measure your world against that dream. How does it measure up? It doesn't measure up, does it?

That dream is God's dream, God's intention. That dream has been embodied, for God's sake. The world has become flesh; it has dwelled among us. Jesus, the mirror of God's intention. The way of Jesus, the way that God calls us to go.

We say, "We're waiting for Messiah." God says, "What are you waiting for? I've showed you throughout all of the prophecy; I've showed you in the face of Jesus. Why do you keep praying for Messiah to come? Why aren't you about turning your world upside down?"

Well, you know, one could really get going on this thing, and I could probably tell you stories about your world and you'd just say, "Oh, I give up." Last month in Rome there was a huge international conference on food. There was one in '74 because they were afraid then we weren't going to be able to feed the multitudes, and there was another one just last month. In the report of that conference on whether or not the earth is going to produce enough for the people in light of the population growth, etc, it said there are in our world today 800 million malnourished human beings. Eight hundred million, and so you could say, "Ah, ..." I mean, at the time of Jesus, there was this apocalyptic strain where, for example, John the Baptist was saying things are so bad, God come down. You know, rend the heavens and come down. Damn the wicked! Stamp out the darkness; establish the righteous. Bring in Your kingdom!"

I can understand that apocalyptic urge. We human beings can get so overburdened with it, so baffled by it that we sort of throw up our hands and say, "What can I do? Who am I? Who am I? What can I do? I'm only one person and the problems are global!" And I probably could ruin your Christmas by putting a little guilt on you. Probably get a pretty good response to the Alternative Christmas Market by reminding you how much you're spending on one another and maybe, you know, a few bucks for the Third World would be good. We have an oversubscription for our Thanksgiving Offering. That's beautiful. That's wonderful. You're a generous people. We feed 350 people - that's great. I think it's wonderful! We adopt needy kids for Christmas - that's beautiful. But it's just tokenism. Those are just tokens of a world that is wrenched with human anguish. And you know what I think? I think Christ Community is the kind of community that has intelligence and commitment and generous hearts, the kind of leaders of society. And wouldn't it be something if out of Christ Community there would come a catalyst group of God's gadflies who would harangue the Ottawa County Commissioners and that would go to Lansing, that would sit on Engler's steps, that would go to Washington, that would bother the Congress, that would petition the President.

Now, there are always in this world those kinds of people that go into the ministry, do-gooders. They're kind of soft, they're kind of flabby; they don't think critically; they don't understand how the world works. They just think if you'd just be nice, everything'd be nice. There are a lot of people like me. But, you know what we need? We need some of you hard-headed, hard-hitting corporate

professional people who would get together and would say, "For God's sake, this world is in trouble. How in the world could we do something about it?"

You see, we've got an underdog religion; we sing *The Magnificat*, but down deep in our hearts, friends, let's be honest, when you're on top, the biggest preoccupation of your life is to maintain that top position, and the hungry masses of the world, the poor, the suffering - they are our threat.

They tell us that the gap between the rich and the poor is getting bigger. And a world where the gap between the rich and the poor gets big enough is a dangerous world. If we didn't want to do it because Jesus calls us to do it, if we didn't want to do it for God's sake, we ought to be thinking about how this world can be transformed because it's not such a mystery.

Has he not shown you, O mortal, what to do? Do justice, love kindness,
walk humbly with your God.

There is enough brain power; there is enough resource. There may be somebody here who could start a movement. After all, little Israel thought that God called it to be a light to the nations. There might be somebody here that would say, "You know, that's really true. We ought to be about something big, something big." The tokens - they're wonderful. Don't stop the tokens. But, there's a world out there, and at Advent I just can't let you hear *The Magnificat* four weeks in a row without feeling uneasy.

"The mighty he has put down and the lowly he has raised up. He has fed
the hungry and set the rich empty away."

I don't have an answer. The human situation is so complex, but wherever there is injustice, wherever there is a human person given a less than humane existence, there's where we ought to be, in the name of God Who has given us that magnificent dream. You see, it's not that we can do it through human ingenuity alone. Obviously not. But, neither can God do it alone. The dream is God's dream and to be caught up in that dream - that would make Advent something really special.