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## *Is Love the Second Coming?*

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A sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith  
Advent 1A

*In the name of God: Our Creator, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen.*

It happened to me again, this first Sunday of Advent. My mind tricks me into thinking of Christmas first, before I remember what happens every year on this day. It's a little like what happens to Charlie Brown this time every year. Maybe you saw it happen again to the poor guy last week" on the annual television broadcast; the cartoon of Charlie Brown's Thanksgiving.

Sure enough last week, inevitably and predictably, like the coming of the season itself, Charlie Brown launched out on his long run. His playmate, Lucy, had invited him to "'kick start' football season by giving a kick to her football. And just as he reached the football Lucy pulled it out from under him. His foot found nothing there but empty space. He was flung up into the air. And down he came landing flat on his back. Tricked again! Poor old Charlie Brown!

The first Sunday of Advent hits me a little like that every year. I don't know about you, but I seem to forget how Advent begins every year with today's gospel of warning and alarm. Inevitably and predictably I'm expecting texts that announce the festive and heart-warming beginning of the Christmas season. Instead I get tricked again: we arrive at this day and I rediscover that Advent starts with the announcement of the Second Coming of Christ, not with his first coming as the "'sweet baby Jesus lying peaceably in a manger.'

So here's my theological problem. At the beginning of every Advent I question whether love is coming when I hear these scriptures. Is love coming in the Second Coming? Is the Second Coming of Christ about love? Or is it about the coming of judgment; about "'kingdom come' with the wrath of God?

Why? Why organize the church calendar this way? Why start the church year with the Second Coming of Christ? Here's a theology for you" a theology for understanding the first Sunday of Advent: It's about intervention.

Intervention. One dictionary defines intervention as "'a situation in which we become involved in someone else's issues or problem in order to influence what happens to them' (Macmillan). And one of the key examples listed is "'intervening in the affairs of other countries.'

Remarkably, that's exactly what's happening in our Old Testament scripture appointed for today. Recall this intervention that we heard read earlier from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

What's remarkable about this prophesy is that the nations actually accept God's intervention! It's not only the prophet's own people listening to his exhortation when he says, "O house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord!" Other peoples and other nations hear that call to help create the "'peaceable kingdom' and the "'beloved community.' And they respond too. As the scripture declares,

Many peoples shall come and say,  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."

What we see here is a successful intervention. Last week we observed the ending of the old church year on the Sunday of Christ the King. On that day we prayed the Collect, that

"the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule . . ."

This Sunday, at the beginning of the new church year, Isaiah's prophecy answers that prayer. "In days to come," he foretells,

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

Now what kind of intervention could possibly bring about such an unlikely fulfillment of prophecy?

To address that question, let's consider what makes a successful intervention in the context of a family setting. I want to tell you the story of a typical family that has decided to intervene on one of its members who is "'enslaved' by addiction. Perhaps you know such a family. Or perhaps you've had direct experience with your own family trying to help a member recover from addiction""any addiction.

In this case Greg is a 35 year-old man with an addiction to alcohol. Rose is his mother, and Audrey, his 79 year-old grandmother. Katie, his younger sister, can't attend the intervention. But his best friend, Ken, is there. Ken is outside the immediate family, so he's been recommended by their intervention counselor to chair the family gathering on the day of intervention. The day is Sunday, and the family has invited Greg to brunch at his grandmother's house. They know how he deeply respects her.

Greg is not expecting Ken to be there, so he's surprised when he rings the bell and his friend opens the door.

"Ken, what are you doing here?" Greg asks.

"Greg," Ken responds warmly with a hand on Greg's shoulder. He looks him straight in the eye and then does exactly what the intervention counselor advised them all to do: start with "'love first.'

Yes, sooner or later you must get to "'tough love,' the counselor acknowledged. In fact, you need to be straightforward and clear about telling the addict what behavior you will or will not any longer tolerate. But using the book called, *Love First* (Jeff and Debra Jay; Hazelden, 2000; p. xv), the counselor emphasized reversing the order.

In most "'tough love' counseling, the "'tough' comes first. In this counseling approach, rather, love comes first. Only after that do you deliver your "'bottom line' of "'zero tolerance.'

"Your family loves you very much, Greg," Ken says accordingly, "and so do I. We're here today because we have some important things to share with you. Come on in, buddy!"

Ken gently guides Greg toward the living room. There an open chair awaits him. The chair is strategically located between his friend and his mother, to whom he is particularly devoted.

"Hey," Greg says hesitantly. "How's everyone doing? What's going on here?"

"Greg," Ken speaks up right away. "We're all fine. Your family's here today because they've taken time to write you letters. They've asked me to be here too because I'm your buddy. Before we all eat they want to share their letters with you, one by one.

"Please just listen as we read; you don't have to respond to each one.

It's not surprising that Greg begins to protest. He's already anticipated what the family gathering is about. "Listen," he says, his eyes flashing fiercely, "I don't need anybody's help! This ain't nobody's business but mine, and I'm not hurting anyone. I can handle this on my own."

Then Ken interrupts. But he also remembers the intervention counselor's number one rule, "'love first.'

"We know, Greg; we know, buddy. You really have tried to handle this on your own. But so far it's just not working-out. Come on, guy, this is our business too. Each of us has been hurt by something that happened when you were drinking. And we love you enough to be here today to help find a new solution. So please, just listen for a while. Your grandmother's going to read her letter now."

"Dear Gregory," Audrey begins, "I was there with your mom and dad the day you were born. Since that day your granddad and I do anything we can for you. But I've always been straight with you too. When you come over smelling of liquor, it's really hard on us. Especially since your granddad's stroke; he can't take worrying about you all the time.

"So we've had to decide that until you get some help with your drinking, you can't come over to the house anymore. We're really sorry to have to turn you away like this. But believe me, it's because we love you and we want the best for you."

"And now," Ken says, "Let's hear from your mom." So Rose reads her letter and, like the letter before, hers also begins with "'love first.'

"Dear Greg, I'm so proud of you, son, for all you've accomplished in your life. And you've been a bright ray of sunshine in my life. But I had to learn that I've also done things that enable you to keep drinking. I can't keep doing that anymore.

Your sister Katie couldn't be here but she wrote how much she loves you too""so much that she couldn't forgive herself if you killed yourself or someone else driving drunk. So her letter says that if she sees you driving drunk she will call the police. I have to say that if you end up on the streets or in jail again, I can't take you in next time, or come to bail you out anymore""not unless you're ready to get help with your drinking. Please son, we can't keep doing this over and over again."

Finally, Ken sums it up for everyone. "So you see, Greg, we'll all stand by you if you just reach out for help. Won't you accept the help we're offering you here today?"

Greg is visibly shaken by this cascade of family members, each one starting with "'love first' and then delivering him their "'bottom line' decisions. In one way or another they all say, "'We love you so much, and that's precisely why we're drawing this line""a line we're not willing to go beyond to help you further.' The cumulative effect has its impact on him.

"I need a minute to think," Greg says.

Several minutes pass while the team remains seated, quietly letting Greg have some time to himself. After several minutes his grandmother, Audrey, adds one last appeal.

"Gregory, this may be the toughest thing you ever do. We're asking you to say yes when everything in you wants to say no. Are you able to stretch for that, Gregory?"

Greg gives a deep sigh and summons his courage. "Okay, Grams, okay. I'll do it."

Audrey reaches over to pat him on the cheek and smiles. "Good for you! We're all so proud of you!"

A successful intervention has just occurred; a process that has been found to have the highest success rate among all efforts to change a family member's addictive behavior. ("What an Intervention Looks Like," "Intervention: A Portrayal," *Love First*; *ibid.* p. 152-161)

But what if? What if Greg had refused to cooperate? Or what if he begins to get help but then relapses back into active addiction, as not infrequently happens? Then the following scenario could ensue.

"Greg," his friend Ken would say after a refusal to cooperate or on some later occasion, "We accept the fact that getting help is ultimately your decision. And we respect your choice not to get help, or not to continue in treatment at this time. From now on, therefore, we must let you bear the full consequences of your decision as best you can. And please believe us when we say that we're ready to reexamine our decision as soon as you reverse course and change yours." ("A Different Ending," *Love First*; *ibid.*, p.166).

And that's the end of Ken's statement. No pleading or threats. No condemnation or dire warnings. Just a still-loving declaration that has been shown to have some success, in fact, in changing things later; later in "the rest of the story" after the addict has indeed suffered the dire consequences of continued destructive behavior.

In fact, claim the authors of the book, *Love First*, a refusal to get help doesn't mean that the addict will never choose recovery. Listen to the authors' almost pastoral conclusion.

[A refusal, they write], just means the process is going to take longer. This is when faith counts. You can't see what's ahead but you've initiated change through your intervention. Stay with your plan. Keep a loving mind-set, follow through with bottom lines, and make decisions as a team. If you do, there's a very good chance [the addict] will go into treatment yet. (*Ibid.*, p. 167)

Now I wonder, to return to the theological problem I confessed earlier; I wonder if the Second Coming of Christ is also like that "what if" scenario. What if today's gospel readings for the first Sunday of Advent are a messianic response to a world that refuses to respond to divine intervention "unlike the nations we hear about in today's Old Testament reading from the book of Isaiah?

What if the divine Intervener has indeed offered us "love first" and in "the rest of the story" the Second Coming part of the story "the world is up against "the bottom line" the line beyond which divinity can no longer tolerate our self-destructive behavior?

And what if "the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may [yet] be freed and brought together under [Christ's] most gracious rule" (Proper 29, Collect for Christ the King, The Book of Common Prayer; p. 236)?

What if our refusal just means the process is going to take longer? What if this is where our faith counts? We can't see what's ahead. But we can believe that in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and in his promised Second Coming, God has already inaugurated successful change. So let's stay with the divine plan. Let us also keep a loving mind-set, follow through with the bottom lines announced in scripture, and make decisions as partners on God's team. (Paraphrase, *Ibid.*, p. 167)

And whatever happens, we have today's prophetic assurance that all the nations taken together cannot ultimately resist God's intervening love "that love inaugurated in the advent of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

*In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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