



Expanded Advent: Why? And the Baptism of Samuel James McConarty
November 7, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the First Sunday of Advent
The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

There is a lot going on in church today!

First, we have a baptism! The baptism of Samuel James McConarty.

We bring Sam into the fellowship of the Body of Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit through water and prayer. It is the foundational sacrament—which is to say an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality—of the Christian faith. Baptism makes manifest God’s love for us and sets us on the path in the way of Jesus.

Second, it is the first day of Advent, which may come as a surprise to some who are newer to our community. This is our second year of trying on an expanded seven-week Advent, partly as a way to get back to earliest roots of the season. When it first took shape in the 5th century, Advent was seven weeks, and until the 13th century or so, it was the primary way that the Church in the West marked it. And it wasn’t just about getting ready for the baby Jesus in the Incarnation; it was about pondering God’s purposes in Creation and the responsibility of humans to join in those purposes.

Expanded Advent begins earlier in the year, so we can bring the power of the Advent traditions around the use of light, and themes of hope, expectation, discernment, judgment, found in our texts and in our music to bring solace and strength to us, in a time of continued uncertainty around the vaccines and the pandemic, the economy, and divisive politics.

And, an earlier Advent can also be a guard against the premature and sometimes forced frivolity that can feel really bad for those of us who don’t feel up to what the secular season of Christmas seems to demand.

Our music today amplifies Advent themes in the hymns; it nods to the story of Ruth in the Offertory Anthem, “The Wedding Song;” and it lifts up Sam’s baptism in the Communion Anthem, “The Welcome Song.”

We may have a case of liturgical indigestion when we are done, for which I take responsibility.

Our readings surface some important Advent themes:

For example: Jesus as the Son of David and a fulfilment of the promises from the Hebrew Bible. The end of the saga of Ruth indicates that she was great-grandmother of David. In the Jewish prophetic tradition, the great King David was to be the ancestor of the Messiah, the One who was to come and save Israel from domination and despair. The Christian tradition adapted that same lore. Jesus came to be seen as



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either the literal descendent of David through his mother Mary, or the figurative descendent, who, like King David, had the particular favor of God and the power change the world.

Then there is the theme of expectant waiting. In the 2nd reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, we see the explicit teaching that Christ will appear a second time to save those who are eagerly, hopefully, waiting for him. (9.28)

And finally in the Gospel passage, there is the theme of God's judgment, particularly of the rich and of religious hypocrisy. And there is another related theme: God is paying attention to those vulnerable people whom society ignores or keeps at arm's length. God is paying attention, and so should we. Ruth and Naomi are widows. Without extended family, widows were, and can still be, quite vulnerable. In addition, Ruth is a Moabite woman, a foreigner, an outsider in Israel. And yet Ruth is part of God's plan for the redemption of the world. Pay attention. In the Gospel Jesus' attention to the widow highlights the contrast between a widow giving her last two coins out of her poverty, and much wealthier members of the community giving out of their abundance. What does it say about the wider community, or maybe her family, that the widow only has two coins left?

Together with his comment about the performative religiosity of the scribes, Jesus chastises religious structures that exploit the sincere piety of the widow, without making sure that she was taken care of. Beware the temptation of religious hypocrisy! Do we walk the talk? In the language of the 4th promise in the Baptismal Covenant, which we will affirm in a moment, "Will we seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves?"

Sam, it's so perfect that you are being baptized on the first Sunday of Advent. It is a time of hope and expectation. It's the beginning of the Church year with its cycle of stories about our ancestors in faith, and the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, which give the Church our story and our lifeblood.

And you, Sam, are beginning, too! The promises about to be made on your behalf are setting you on a path to follow Jesus, to do good in the world, supported in love by your parents, godparents, extended family, and this Christian community. We are excited for you!

So, let's get started!

Amen.