Sermon for Advent III

December 11, 2011

Lessons:

Isaiah 61:1-4. 8-11

Psalm 126

I Thessalonians 5: 16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

The VTS campus was decorated with little white lights the week before Thanksgiving. A grand N.C. Fraser Fir was placed in the Welcome Center and covered with lights. Of course, immediately, Facebook came to life. Some of our alums were “deeply distressed” that we were celebrating Christmas early. One alum wrote: Surprised-NO; Disappointed-YES. You’ve got to love loyal alums!

What our alums who were concerned did not know is that the lights were really Advent lights not Christmas lights. Our students leave before Christmas for time with family and friends. So, we need to mark Advent in special ways.

I told Frank Griswold, the 25th Primate and Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church about the flap over little white lights. He quickly said: “Now tell them that the lights are for a long season, the “Hall-thank-mas” Season—Halloween to Thanksgiving Day through Christmastide.

Advent should not be part of Christmas. We need this season to prepare, to get ready for the one who will bring good news to the oppressed, who will bind up the brokenhearted—to get ready for the Lord who will proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. John the Baptist was Jesus’ Advent—the man for a season who told of the One who would come—the Messiah—the One who “would make straight the way of the Lord.”

Our Advent is a time to get ready—but it is a season deeper and more important than a flap over white lights. As a child, our rector told the parish that we could not play Christmas carols in church or at home during Advent. My mother called for time out. She said: “Give me a break.” We heard the carols of Christmas as we prepared for the great season which was to come.

What are we really preparing for? We are preparing for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We are not getting ready for a baby in a manger. We are preparing for the coming of the One who is our hope, our Lord, our Savior. As a poet has reminded us, “the wood of the crib is the wood also of the cross.” We draw near to Bethlehem because we are traveling to Jerusalem—to the cross, to the hope of life eternal. Christmas is intertwined with Easter. You cannot separate them because they are one in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We keep the great season of Christmas because of Easter. We need Advent because we have Easter Day.
If the Church year deals with such intertwining seasons, so do we in the worlds we live in. Politics cannot be disengaged from religion. The state and religion are not separate, pure worlds. In yesterday’s Wall Street Journal (December 10-11, 2011), there was an article: “God’s Quarterback: The Tim Tebow Phenomenon.” The title of the article included: “He has led the Denver Broncos to one improbable victory after another—defying his critics and revealing the deep-seated anxieties in American Society about the intertwining of religion and sports.” The article examined what is called “Tebow time.” “In the waning moments against the New York Jets, Mr. Tebow manufactured a 95-yard-game-winning drive, punctuated by his own 20 yard touchdown dash. He brought the Broncos back from imminent defeat, just as he had done in previous weeks against the Miami Dolphins, Oakland Raiders and Kansas City Chiefs.”

“And when the shouting was over, Mr. Tebow did what he always does—he pointed skyward and took a knee in prayer. In post-game interviews, the young quarterback often starts by saying, ‘First, I’d like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’ and ends with ‘God bless.’ He stresses that football is just a game and that God doesn’t care who wins or loses.”

Tebow seems to know his Bible. He paints scripture references on his cheeks under his eyes before each game. There’s Ephesians 4:32: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” For the game against the Oklahoma Sooners it was John 3:16. For another game he remembered Romans 1: 16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”

The key sentence in the article is: “A public figure’s seemingly admirable character throws us. We don’t know how to trust goodness.” It is true—we do not know how to trust goodness. We too often assume the worst.

After the 8:00AM service, a man told me that Tim Tebow is gay—so, “ the word on the street.” I said: “So, what.” Another well meaning soul came up to me like a great ship coming into harbor. She said: Well, you obviously wrote your sermon yesterday since you referred to yesterday’s Journal. In my defense, I said: I had an almost 4 hour flight from Dallas yesterday morning—so I used it to continue work on my sermon.

“Tebowing” is about intertwining religion and sports. Perhaps we should focus on something other that intertwining Advent and Christmas in the Episcopal Church. I am worried about something larger. I am worried about the way we “ring fence” religion in modern-day America. I want to see more intertwining of religion and sports, religion and politics, religion and life. But it is complicated. Religion for me is not about matters black and white. Religion is not living without gray areas. Religion for me is about critical thinking, informed by faith which seeks understanding.

You see, we await a Lord and Savior at Christmas who will forgive Tim Tebow when he falls short and makes a mistake. We await a Lord who makes our “goodness” complete. We await a Lord who does not baptize with water—but one who gave his life so we might live and live for an eternal season with God.
It does not matter when you put up your tree or adorn your trees with lights. You can sing Christmas carols in November or December or July. What matters is that we prepare our hearts and minds for the One who comes after John the Baptist, the One who will be born in a manger and who will go to the cross of Calvary for us. We prepare for this Lord and Savior who is Jesus Christ. Prepare with Joy for the Lord’s coming.

JAMES BARNEY HAWKINS IV