

Rev. Jim Larsen

Sermon - 1 December 2019

(with thanks to Garrison Kiellor for the germ of an idea for this story)

Sunday morning arrived clear and calm. It had rained a little overnight, but by dawn the clouds had blown away, and cooler, drier air was settling in as the congregation of St. Bartholomew's Lutheran Church began to arrive for worship. Bertha Davenport parked her car in her accustomed place and got out with a puzzled look on her face.

Bertha was early by her standards, but that only meant that she didn't need to rush to get to her pew before Mr. Jensen finished the prelude. But that was the puzzle -- here it was just five minutes to eleven, and Mr. Jensen's car was not in his regular parking place next to Bertha's. In fact, she didn't see his car anywhere, and this puzzled her quite a bit.

Mr. Jensen was always there ahead of time. He normally arrived about 10:30 -- 20 minutes or more before he began the prelude. He said he needed that time alone with God to prepare himself for worship. But this morning was different. Here it was just five minutes before worship, and no one (not just Bertha, but no one at all) knew where Mr. Jensen was. Fortunately Mae Belle Evans was in worship that morning, and she was willing to cover for the absent Mr. Jensen, so the service music didn't suffer too much. But it was a matter of concern to Rev. Johnson and to Mr. Jensen's son, Travis, especially, that Mr. Jensen was absent and hadn't at least said something to anyone.

As it turns out, while Rev. Johnson was in the pulpit preaching about Advent being a time of waiting and watching and preparing to receive the Lord, that's just what Mr. Jensen was doing --

at least the waiting and watching part. While Rev. Johnson was standing in the pulpit, Mr. Jensen was lying on his back watching a hawk soaring high overhead, listening to the sounds of squirrels scuffling about in their search for nuts among the fallen leaves, and of the birds chattering to one another as he waited for someone to come and rescue him.

You see, it wasn't just his love of nature that held him there to watch and wait. It was his tractor which was lying upside down on top of him pinning his right arm to a limb of the dead tree he had been hauling out of his field.

Mr. Jensen had been up and about early that morning. That was something quite normal for him as all the Jensen men were early risers. And as he finished his coffee and toast he decided that he would use the three hours he had before getting ready to go to church to remove the old oak tree that last week's storm had uprooted into his cornfield. He put on his heavy overalls, got on his tractor and drove it out to the field in question as the sun was making its appearance over the eastern horizon. Wrapping a heavy chain around the trunk of the offending tree he began to haul it back toward the edge of the woods from which it insinuated itself into the cornfield.

Everything was going fine until the stub of a broken limb caught on something under the soil. Suddenly Mr. Jensen found himself looking up at the pale blue sky as his tractor popped a wheelie and fell back on top of him. Mr. Jensen jumped to get clear of the somersaulting tractor, and everything would have ended up alright had not his right forearm, the tractor's right front wheel and one of the tree's limbs all ended up trying to occupy the same space at the same time.

As it turned out, Mr. Jensen found himself lying on the ground under his tractor, unharmed but for the discomfort in his arm where he was pinned, unable to free himself from his predicament.

He could see right away that his situation was not grave. True, he couldn't just get up and walk back to the house. But his injuries weren't serious, and he knew he would be missed. It was only a matter of time before someone came to help him out of his fix. It wasn't a question of "if" he would be found, only "when". So there he lay, watching and waiting. Certain of his rescue, and hoping it would be soon.

I don't know if it occurred to him that his was the perfect Advent posture. In fact, he made a much better illustration of that than any of the illustrations Rev. Johnson used in his sermon that morning. His inability to free himself from that which held him (for us that would be sin), Combined with the certainty of his rescue and the uncertainty as to the time (for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour), matched perfectly the prophetic words of Jesus that were read in church that morning. "But about that day and hour no one knows. . . . therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Mr. Jensen knew that his rescue was at hand. Someone would come and find him and free him. So as the minutes passed and turned to hours he remained intensely alert for the sound of a car in the drive, for the sound of a voice, of footsteps, of the siren coming to free him. He knew it would come, and he prayed it would come soon (which it did when Travis arrived shortly after church).

I think we experience Advent a lot like Mr. Jensen experienced being trapped by his tractor and the tree. We don't much like to wait. We know Christmas is coming. We can see it on the calendar. We can see its signs all around us beginning sometime in September when the stores begin preparing for the make-or-break retail season Christmas has become.

But Advent is much more than a build-up for the celebration of Christmas. Advent is a time of intentional, expectant waiting, and of actively watching for the signs, and of preparing ourselves to receive the Long-awaited and Promised One who comes not only in history as we celebrate his birth 2,000 years ago, and who comes also at some unknown and unknowable future date as Judge of All, but who comes to us repeatedly and incessantly in our everyday experience of living among God's people.

And this is perhaps the most important aspect of Advent for our lives. How do we watch and wait and prepare to receive our Lord who is always coming into our lives?

Matthew tells us that at Jesus's birth the heavens were shaken by a bright new star that filled some with hope for the future and filled others with fear and foreboding. Kings in their palaces and shepherds in the fields were distressed by signs in the heavens and on the earth as God entered human existence in a new and unexpected way.

And Jesus warned his followers that the whole cosmos would undergo great stress at the promised coming of God's Kingdom. God's presence, it seems, is bound to cause us discomfort as our imperfect ways give way to God's perfection.

For some, Jesus says, this is a time of fear and foreboding, not knowing what is at hand. But for his followers, there is to be no fear, no foreboding. For Christians know what and who is coming. Though the signs may be fearful, we do not shrink back. Instead, we stand tall to welcome the King of Glory, not only as a baby born in a stable 2,000 years ago, but as our Lord born anew in our hearts each day.

We enter Advent seeking God's presence among us. And we know that God's presence will of

necessity bring upset to our comfortable existence. When that happens, fear not. God is near. Enmeshed in all times of struggle are new opportunities to experience God in our lives. For God has promised to be with us always, and as you know, God's promises are secure.

Whenever times of trial and tribulation overtake you, do not be dismayed. As you struggle to regain your equilibrium, look for Christ's hands reaching out in the hands of your brother, listen for the voice of Christ offering comfort and encouragement in the voice of your sister, expect the arrival of Christ in the arrival of your neighbor, and Christ will be with you.

Be Advent people this season. Wait for the Lord. Watch for signs of his presence. Put your hope in him, and prepare your hearts to receive him as he comes to us in the here and now of our life together.

And as the early Church prayed for the fulfilling of God's Kingdom among us, so we join our prayers to theirs – Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come! Amen!