

“You Matter...They Matter”
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Mark 13:24-37

This is the First Sunday of Advent. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines advent, in its third meaning, as the arrival of an important person. Engaging Jesus, fully human and fully God, is crucial for our identity as humans.

Living as an interconnected, interdependent people of 7.2 billion is of paramount significance. We're one big family. It's true my friends. We're all in this together. Experiencing that your life and their lives matter is unifying and assists us in working through the family squabbles.

There was a man named Jeremiah Lanphier who lived in New York City during the 1850s. Those were years of tension, when the shadow of war loomed over America. There were strikes, depressions, failing banks, long jobless lines, and an air of simmering violence. In this setting, Lanphier accepted a calling as a full-time city evangelist. He walked the streets, knocked on doors, put up posters, and prayed constantly—all to no visible result. As his discouragement increased, Lanphier looked for some kind of new idea, some possibility for breakthrough. New York was a business town; maybe the men would come to a luncheon. So he nailed up his signs, calling for a noon lunch in the Old Dutch Church on Fulton Street. When the hour came, he sat and waited until finally a single visitor arrived. Several minutes later, a couple of stragglers peeked through the door. The handful of them had a nice meal. Lanphier gave his idea another go on the following week. Twenty men attended; at least it was a start. But then forty came on the third week. The men were getting to know each other by this time, and one of them suggested he'd be willing to come for food and prayer every day. Lanphier thought that was a good sign, and he ramped up his efforts for a daily meal and prayer time. Before long, the building was overflowing. The luncheon had to move again and again, so high was the demand. The most intriguing element of the “Fulton Street Revival,” as they called the phenomenon, was the ripple effect. Offices began closing for prayer at noon Fulton Street was the talk of the town, with men telegraphing prayer news back and forth between New York City and other cities—yes, other cities had started their own franchises; other godly meetings were launching in New York. The center of the meeting was prayer, and it was okay to come late or leave early, as needed Men stood and shared

testimonies. [This was not] a place for the well-known preachers of the day—this was about the working class, businessmen who wanted to share the things of God. Some historians went so far as to refer to the Fulton Street Revival as the Third Great Awakening, because it lasted for two years and saw as many as one million decisions for Christ. Given the influence of New York City, no one could estimate the national and international impact that spread out from Jeremiah Lanphier’s simple lunch breaks...¹

The lives of many New York City businessmen changed in the 1850s, because of one man’s vision for unity in the family of the business community. A simple love for all businessmen, regardless of color or creed was all that was required. All were invited.

In the midst of racial tensions, high unemployment and the looming war, Jeremiah Lanphier was not deterred from praying for revival. Jeremiah Lanphier knocked on doors and hung posters inviting businessmen to attend a weekly luncheon. Lanphier prayed that each in attendance would know how loved they were by God and the circumstances in their lives did not define them. In this regard, Bobby Schuller, the pastor of Shepherd’s Grove Presbyterian Church in Irvine wrote *Creed of the Beloved*, 170 years later: “I’m not what I do. I’m not what I have. I’m not what people say about me. I am the beloved of God. It’s who I am. No one can take it from me. I don’t have to worry. I don’t have to hurry. I can trust my friend Jesus and share his love with the world.”² You matter to God. They matter to God.

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 and Mark 13:24-37 warn the people of God to take their relationship with God seriously. Why? As Christians live the gospel, in word and deed, others will see, and experience hope to navigate the destructive ways of the world.

¹Ronnie Floyd, *Our Last Great Hope* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 167-169.

²Bobby Schuller, *You Are Beloved* (Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson Books, 2018), 16.

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 invites the people of God to place renewed trust in God for their ongoing salvation.

Mark 13:24-37 is a wake-up call for the people of God. Loyalty to Jesus and his way assists us in navigating the breakdown of “this world.” We bring hope to those who are bewildered and hurting in order to prepare as many people to be redeemed before the cataclysmic end. It is in the context of human suffering that people see God at work. The people of God serve others in need just as Jesus did. God’s mission is about restoration to personhood and a way of life that God intends. We all need to respond to the suffering which occurs in our lives and communities. There are clear signs and some not so clear of the pending arrival of the Messiah. Mark’s apocalyptic predictions of the arrival of the Messiah, the second time, prevents the church from its slide into the pagan comforts of the pre-Christmas season. Mark emphasizes that grace is the source for all that we think, say, and do to live the way of Jesus. Faithfulness in season and out of season is the key.³

On this First Sunday of Advent, we lit the hope candle on the Advent Wreath. Genuine hope energizes the people of God to act. We must recognize that we are not owners in Christ’s church. We are servants. Our loyalty is to Jesus and our individual and collective work in the shared mission of God. We are responsible to tend to the work of “healing, loving, proclaiming, and holding fast while the Lord is away.”⁴ Friends, Christ was pre-existent at creation. Jesus becomes one with Christ in his birth. As God said,

³In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Jerome F. D. Creach, Glen Bell, F. Scott Spencer and Andrew Foster Connors in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 1* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 2-5, 5-8, 13-15, 15-17.

⁴Andrew Foster Connors in *Connections, Year B, Volume 1*, 17.

“Let there be light” at creation, Jesus Christ came to show us the way. Advent is more than a simple preparation for Christmas. At Advent, God claims us as God’s own, as beloved. The mystery of God comes at us every moment.

Advent, from the Latin, *Adventus*, means “coming.” Look to Jesus. As we are embraced by God and embrace God in return, we then realize the purpose of our lives. You can show others the way to their belovedness. Jesus’ message is that you are family. You’re not what you do. You’re not what you have. You’re not what people say about you. You are the beloved of God. It’s who you are. No one can take it from you. You don’t have to worry. You don’t have to hurry. You can trust your friend Jesus and share his love with the world. You matter to God. They matter to God. All are beloved by the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of life. Some just don’t know that yet! Live hope in serving others. So let’s get at it. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 29 November 2020,
The First Sunday of Advent, by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in his Study
at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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