

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Words of Excitement

Dale and I were talking with a shop clerk earlier this week at a store in Bluffton. We could hardly hear what the person was trying to tell us because, in the background, some really annoying music was blaring—something about having a “Holly, jolly Christmas.” Dale asked the person, “When you go home after a whole day of being blasted by those same songs—over and over—do you even turn on any music?”

Advent season can be a time of exhaustion. It's kind of like being in a plane that's forced to circle the airport endlessly, awaiting word that it's finally safe to land. It seems that Christmas is here and yet it's not. Big Box store sales, TV commercials, and Santa parades all contrive to get us into the so-called “festive holiday spirit” but, of course, it's not yet holiday time. It's only a time of waiting.

The problem is that we've pretty much lost the whole point of the Church season called Advent. We've allowed it to become a waiting room for the real thing when, in fact, Advent IS a big deal in itself. What it's all about is the start-up of a brand new calendar. Advent is the Christian New Year. It's a time not of waiting but exactly the opposite—Opening Day, a fresh start, a whole new ballgame. That's why all of the traditional prayers of Advent season begin with asking God to come and STIR UP all of us, shake us out of our sleep, get us excited.

I don't know what your mood is these days, but it seems to me that Advent 2010 is coming along just at the right time. There has been a lot of disappointment and frustration going around locally, nationally, and internationally. What with anxiety about terrorists, being manhandled by security people in the airports, suffering from the fallout of economic institutional collapse, constant home foreclosures, and stubborn joblessness statistics there, admittedly, is plenty to discourage us these days. It's easy to lapse into a mood of depressed resignation. But then, lo and behold, suddenly it's Advent! It's the season of new hope. It couldn't come, in my opinion, at a better time. We really need it right now.

Personally, I have to say that this particular Advent is one that finds me in a very positive mood, ready and excited to get on with what I think God is trying to do in my life. I see some good reasons to be looking forward this year. So, this morning, let me share with you just three reasons that I find to be excited.

The first reason that I'm excited and anticipating the next installment is simply **The Times**—these days in which we live. Now you may very well question me about that one because contemporary life is certainly a two-sided reality. I've already said that we live in the midst of a confusing set of fears, frustrations, anxieties, and hostilities. But, that having been said, we also (and much more importantly in my opinion) are here on this earth at a watershed period of history. There are truly amazing and miraculous breakthroughs happening every day in the fields of health, science, communication, the arts, and human relationships. This is a period of advancement and discovery unparalleled since the Renaissance. There are more people alive and actively pursuing the future than are in all the graves of history. More people are experiencing freedom: freedom from political oppression, freedom from the ravages of disease, and freedom from lives of pointless drudgery and death. Our planet is shrinking as we are forced to deal with all those “others” whom we have ignored or exploited for centuries. We are being challenged to understand and embrace our Oneness throughout the whole wide earth and to expand our consciousness of our shared inheritance. In all this, God is being revealed as Lord over all—God of the universe, not just our “made in the USA” white, middle-class protector of this na-

tion alone. The family of all mankind is engaged in the great and exciting struggle to find common cause and cooperation. We are being challenged to see ourselves as a world-wide kinship of sisters and brothers seeking harmony and stewardship as fellow passengers aboard Spaceship Earth, our mutual and fragile global home. If you're not excited about all that, you need to wake up this Advent.

Secondly, I'm excited about **Our Faith**. We like to describe ourselves as being "enthusiastically Episcopal" as our religious character. I'm not sure that most people are very enthusiastic about organized religion but I think there's a lot of interest and excitement about faith—the sense of being a part of God's wonderful work of building peace and harmony among individuals and peoples. So, as a label for the second reason I feel excitement these days I choose the word "faith" rather than "religion" intentionally because, ironically, what I find exciting actually involves in these times a freedom from religion. What I'm talking about is that most of us grew up during a time when "religion," I think we would have to honestly say, seemed to be a superstitious and grim groveling before a tyrannical God. Well, in our own time we have seen a sea change. There is a fresh and growing sense of God's love and forgiveness—a recognition (as the words of that wonderful hymn tell us) that Grace, indeed, will bring us home. That is Good news indeed! This Advent there's a fresh breeze stirring theologically in which all of us are receiving the authentic benefits of our heritage: the emphasis, increasingly, is on our relationship with God, not the demands of servitude and the fear of punishment. Our mental picture of God is changing and the image is filled with warmth, not just anger. The children of our Sunday School are joyous, not fearful. Sure we're imperfect and we fall short all the time but the Good News is that God keeps lifting us up and setting us once more on the right path. You need to get excited about what a difference it makes that you and I are invited into a faithful, personal relationship with our Creator, the One who loves each of us profoundly. If you're not excited about that, you need to wake up this Advent.

The third area of excitement for me is **This place** in which God is at work. It's exciting to be a part of a faith community that really MATTERS. People who belong to St. Mark's Chapel make that commitment not simply as a socially or politically "correct" decision. Everyone here has taken a stand of sorts—deciding to align themselves with a faith community that values intellectual and ethical honesty. We have chosen to identify with those whom the establishment too often rejects and dismisses. But, however "upstream" we may be swimming, taking the unpopular stand certainly has its blessings. We're certainly not just the local church conducting "business as usual." God's hand is upon us. There could be no other accounting for the growth, the progress and the ministry effectiveness here at St. Mark's Chapel. If you're not excited about that, you need to wake up!

The Times, Our Faith, This Place—Three good, sound, positive reasons to wake up each day with a strong sense of God's calling and a sense of genuine excitement. We have these times, our faith, this church community—three very powerful motivators. For me, these considerations spell something very worth getting involved in and something very worth the commitment of your financial support on this Pledge Sunday.

So, today as we find ourselves in the midst of Advent 2010, let those ancient words of liturgy and scripture fill our hearts and minds with joy and anticipation. However you translate the original Greek, the Collects we pray each Sunday leading up to Christmas are filled with energy. They're not words of waiting around. Listen to their message: Stir up, excite, rise up, greet with joy, be prepared, get with it, inspire, wake up, inflame, enkindle—these are the words and phrases that communicate the theme and mood of Advent. I commend them to you as a way to offset the stress and the tedious chores of holiday preparations. Give yourself a gift this Advent—the gift of excitement. If you do, not only will you benefit but so will all the rest of us...because excitement is the most contagious gift of all.