

Being the Church at Brentwood

Our True Potential in the Spirit

**Ps.80 & Romans 8:9-17
(Hymns –301, 380, 160, 126)**

November 27, 2011 – Advent 1

I've had a good lesson in the dynamics of Advent
as I have waited this week for Jill to get home from Cuba.
She and Signe, one of her best friends,
went to enjoy the sun, sand, and vibe of that country
on Nov 11 and returned yesterday.

I looked forward to her arrival all week.
Life was not the same without her.
There was an energy, a presence,
a companionship,
that had been missing in my life.

My appreciation for Jill's love in our relationship
became sharper and more focused in her absence.
It's always been there,
but her absence did make my heart freshly aware of it.

It's good to be back together in the flesh.

Advent is the season of the year leading up to coming of God in the flesh.
For human beings,
those to whom and for whom
God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ,
this is a time of excited anticipation.
It is a time when we re-create in our souls
the sense of being surprised by joy
when the ancient promises of God to save his people
were fulfilled in a strangely satisfying way.

Many anticipated that God would come in a great burst of glory,
with armies and power and grandeur.
The great battle with evil would be engaged
and God would win for his people.
Multitudes would be vanquished and destroyed,
consigned to eternal damnation,
while multitudes more would be saved and enjoy eternal bliss.

But God has different plans.
His approach to the fulfillment of his promises surprised most.
Many found,
and frankly, still find,
this God's approach to redeeming the world confusing and offensive.

God came in the flesh in a quiet corner of the Roman Empire,
in the obscure form of a baby
born to the young wife of a small-town carpenter.
The birth was noticed and celebrated by a few shepherds
and three scholars from further east.
Nothing obvious or really notable happened for 30 years.
Then this Jesus Christ, in whom God chose to become flesh
and dwell among us in grace and truth,
began a public ministry as a travelling prophet and teacher
that eventually got him executed for religious sedition.

For many, that was the end of the story –
another rebellious rabble-rouser sent to his final reward.

But for those who had been drawn close to God in the flesh,
to the growing circles of people who saw in this Jesus Christ
what it meant to be fully human in relationship with the divine Spirit,
it was only the beginning.

God raised Jesus from the dead
and sent the Spirit to be his continuing presence in the world.
By drawing more and more people
into a flourishing relationship with Jesus Christ,
to draw them into Jesus Christ,
the Spirit formed the church as the body of Christ,
the primary means by which Jesus Christ remains active in the world.

That's a lot to anticipate and to celebrate.
But that is our focus in this season of Advent –
The coming of God in the flesh,
full of grace and truth in the person of Jesus Christ,
making it possible for all human beings to flourish
in the power of the Holy Spirit.

With that action of God foremost in his mind,
this flourishing of human beings in the power of the Holy Spirit
is what Paul is explaining to the church at Rome and to us
in the passage we have been exploring this week.

Paul draws a sharp contrast
between living according to our sinful human nature
and living in union with the Spirit.

On our own, without knowing Jesus Christ,
we are filled with many fears
that put us out of sync with our true potential.

That potential,
seen most clearly in the life of Jesus Christ
and available to us in Jesus Christ,
is filled with hope, peace, love, and joy.

Those are the gifts of the Spirit
that generate true human flourishing
as we grow into the adult children God encourages us to be.

They are the gifts we celebrate with our Advent candles each year.

They are the gifts this world desperately needs
to have embodied in human beings
in order to overcome its fascination with and addiction to death.

They are the gifts through which
human beings become the blessings they were created to be.

They are the gifts that bring the energy or glory of God
into a world of sin and darkness
through the work and witness of the divine Father's
robust and resilient children.

Those children, living in the power of the Spirit, are the church.

They are not perfect.

They are, as Paul says elsewhere, treasures in earthen vessels.

In this passage from Romans,
and throughout his letters to the early church,
Paul reminds and encourages his brothers and sisters in Christ
to focus on being the treasures, on being the blessings,
God has given them the potential to be.

And they are we.

Paul speaks to us as clearly as to them,
encouraging us to take up the gifts of the Spirit
and live in their strength.