

A few years ago Lutheran Brotherhood of Minneapolis commissioned a survey on religious attitudes. 1,027 randomly selected adults completed the survey. The survey found something astonishing: Americans actually spend as much time worshiping in this holiday season as they spend shopping, 16.4 hours worshipping, 16 hours shopping. A summary of the findings said this: **"It seems that many people haven't allowed commercialism to overshadow the spiritual basis of the holidays."** Really? I was surprised, skeptical. I guess I missed those impossibly crowded pews and the traffic jams in the church parking lots. I must have missed the religious equivalent of "Black Friday," that day after Thanksgiving when the ledgers of the department stores turn from red ink to black ink. The results of the survey would mean that most people would have to worship 3 1/2 hours during each of the four weeks of Advent to get to the 16.4 hours of worshipping.

Did the survey actually measure religious practices in the home apart from Church on Sunday? Or did the people surveyed give the answer they thought they should rather than the answer that actually reflects their behavior? After all, half of the Christians in America will not spend ten minutes in church this holiday season. Or do Americans think they ought to spend as much time worshipping as shopping? A young believer at a mall was interviewed about the survey. She was asked: "How do you account for the finding that Americans spend as many hours worshipping as shopping?" "Oh," she said, "that's simple. They're the same hours." Ah! At last a

rational explanation. For many shopping is worship!

In our culture, the Christmas season is beginning ever earlier, as early as mid-October, as department stores roll out their holiday displays and begin playing Christmas music. I don't know how their employees stand listening to it for eight hours a day for months. Catholics are supposed to live and celebrate by a very different calendar. We are to let our faith and the ancient wisdom and tradition of the Church center us as we plan, schedule, organize, prepare, and celebrate. That process begins right here on these Sundays before Christmas. The Scripture readings invite us to adapt their perspective of our world and our place in it, to reflect on God's intentions for our world, for our church and for us. During this season we will also celebrate, on Tuesday, December 8th, a holy day in honor of Mary, the Feast of her Immaculate Conception. We will gather here to celebrate that truth that Mary was conceived without sin because God wanted his sinless son to have a sinless mother. Perhaps its time for us to reclaim the practice of worshiping together occasionally on a day that is not a Sunday.

We begin a new church year on this first Sunday of Advent. The church year does not begin with the story of the birth of Jesus, but with the story of the ending. Our Gospel for this first Sunday of Advent speaks about the coming of the Son of Man in power and glory at the end of time and history. This is the Second Coming, the return of Jesus to vindicate those who have believed in him. But that's where we ended the previous church year last weekend on the Feast of Christ the King. Our church year every

year shows us that every ending holds the promise of a new beginning, and every beginning has the guarantee of an ending. We would not be celebrating the birth of Christ if we didn't know the end of the story, the redemption he accomplished on the cross. But the cross isn't only an ending, it is the promise of a new beginning, a new birth for us into eternal life.

The return of Christ the King in power and glory to end human history and time was not to be taken as a divine threat, like "God will get you, if you aren't careful!" The fear was to be replaced by hope, the terror with joy and gratitude: "WHEN THESE THINGS BEGIN TO HAPPEN, STAND UP STRAIGHT AND RAISE YOUR HEADS, FOR YOUR RANSOM IS AT HAND." The presence of Christ, his coming again and again to each one of us, his final coming to each one of us, his return at the end of time will mean deliverance and salvation and a new beginning always.

That theology should determine how we prepare and celebrate this season. A few suggestions: First, come to Mass on these Sundays of Advent, the Feast of Mary on December 8<sup>th</sup>, and, of course, on Christmas. The worship we do together is the most important part of our discipleship. Second use an Advent Wreath. It's been around since the Middle Ages. We'll use one here together. All you need is four candles, arranged in a circle. That circle is a sign of eternity, endings that are always beginnings. Light the candles for a few minutes each day as the family gathers around, perhaps for the evening meal, or just a few minutes of prayer and reflection. Third, add religious decorations to that evergreen tree, ornaments, made

or that represent some important event in Israel's history. Fourth, celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with your family at one of the many opportunities provided. It is after all the season when we remember the beginning of God's great act of mercy for us. Fifth, set up a nativity scene. This was made popular by St. Francis of Assisi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Add people or elements that remind you of your life, family, or job. Fifth, remember the poor and our call to use what we have been given to lessen the hardships of others. Surely, this is more appropriate at this time of the year than at any other.

I read in the Minneapolis Paper Friday about a group called "Advent Conspiracy." It is the goal of this group to reclaim Christmas from the Commercial interests that have so thorough usurped this season. There are four basic steps: Worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all. How do we give more while spending less? By investing our time in relationships. The best way to express the Christmas spirit is not by spending more. Our celebration of Christmas is to be simple. It simply is not proper to celebrate the birth of God's Christ in humble and poor circumstance by greed, conspicuous consumption, and by piles of things we don't really need. Materials things never held a family together. In fact, the opposite is true. We are called this season to be faithful to the profoundly simple truth of Christmas: God is not far off and distant from the human race. He is Immanuel, God with us.