



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## Come, Lord Jesus!

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ DECEMBER 3, 2017

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In order to embrace the Christian faith to the fullest, we must be able to recognize that we are a part of something much greater than ourselves. It is not all about us! It includes us obviously, i.e. our experience of the love of Christ and the blessing of salvation. But we are a part of something that is much greater than any one of us. It is nothing less than living as citizens of the Kingdom of God. We have many allegiances: we are citizens of the United States, we are citizens of the State of Florida, we might even consider ourselves to be citizens of the world. We live in communities, we are part of families, we are part of the church, we may even have sports teams or other organizations to which we have an allegiance, but none of these compare to the highest allegiance: Christ and His Kingdom. That is our true home! In this world with all of its wonders, marvels, blessings, and great things to experience, we still must recognize that we are but sojourners here and that our true home is THERE.

The idea of being a part of something bigger than myself has been ingrained in me for a very, very long time because since I was a young teenager, I have had the privilege of playing in symphony orchestras. Very early on I learned that my part was not the only part or usually even the most important part, however, my part was essential to fulfill the composer's vision of what his piece should communicate to the audience. I must play my part and play it well.

As Christ's disciples, each of us has a part to play in Christ Jesus' Kingdom. Like an orchestral player, each one of us must play our part; it is essential to realize the vision of the Master. We must not just **play** our part, we must **live** our part, and live it well.

To live as a part of Christ's Kingdom carries with it a measure of risk. To stand for Jesus, and to stand with Him in this fallen world that is so greatly different from and contrary to His ways and His values, can be difficult. For Christ, His work led to a cross! How can we, as His disciples, expect any less?

We may not be called to actual martyrdom, however many of our brothers and sisters around the world are being called to just that and we must always pray for them. In our culture we may simply suffer the abuse or ridicule, the arrows or attacks, for being one of those "Jesus people." Also, carrying the burdens of others' struggles can result in their directing their burden at us. We receive their anger, their sinfulness, and their frustration. It is easy to take it personally even though it may not have anything to do with us.

Once in a while, God gives us a glimpse of what will someday come to pass and what is possible even now in terms of reconciliation between people. Sometimes God inspires people to step out of their comfort zone to reach out to those from whom they have been separated by misunderstandings, by sins of all sorts, and yes, even by violence. There is a great risk in doing this. There is no magic formula for success in a world full of fallen people who live under the tyranny of what theologians call "total depravity." When we do these things, it is not with the expectation of a guaranteed result or to get our way. The results are determined by the Holy Spirit. We do them because it is the right thing to do.

On the world stage, you might remember a man from the 1970's by the name of Anwar el-Sadat. When Anwar el-Sadat was the Prime Minister of Egypt, he made an unprecedented trip from Egypt to Jerusalem to meet with his former adversary in military combat, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. As a result of that visit and their struggles together, to this day Egypt and Israel have not been combatants as they once were. Anwar Sadat was assassinated by Egyptians. Perhaps you also remember that in the 1990's, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin made the unprecedented step of sitting down and talking with the Palestinians; he was assassinated by an Israeli.

We will most likely not be called to serve on the world stage, but we nevertheless all have our own sphere of influence. We have many relationships in our own life: encounters with friends, acquaintances, and complete strangers; situations which God puts in our path that are sometimes difficult and painful or inconvenient. I encourage you not to view these as situations to avoid, but as opportunities to be salt and light in this broken and troubled world.

Into my own sphere of influence, God has seen fit to bring two very special gentlemen. One of them, Tzachi Kolombus, is a Jewish man who at one time was a paratrooper in the Israeli Defense Force. Another is Sheik Yousef al-Fahoum who is the leader of the White Mosque in Nazareth. God brought these two men into my life, and I have chosen to participate in this trio of unlikely friends. Even with the complete candor of our conversations, we have come to form a very warm friendship and we consider one another as brothers.

I am further inspired by two other gentlemen. One is the great Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim, and the other is the Palestinian educator Edward Said. Together they agreed that if

there were ever to be any semblance of peace in the Middle East, it needed to be nurtured through the children, the young people. These leaders joined to cast the vision for the young, and from their sphere of influence they formed the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. It is a youth orchestra, conducted by Maestro Barenboim consisting of Israeli students and Palestinian students. These young people come together, they rehearse together, they fellowship together, and they play concerts together. This has been heralded as an instrument of peace in the Middle East. However, Daniel Barenboim has a very realistic view of what is possible and was quoted as saying,

The Divan is not a love story, and it is not a peace story. It has very flatteringly been described as a project for peace. It isn't. It's not going to bring peace, whether you play well or not so well. The Divan was conceived as a project against ignorance. A project against the fact that it is absolutely essential for people to get to know the other, to understand what the other thinks and feels, without necessarily agreeing with it. I'm not trying to convert the Arab members of the Divan to the Israeli point of view, and [I'm] not trying to convince the Israelis to the Arab point of view. But I want to...create a platform where the two sides can disagree and not resort to knives.

One of the students in the orchestra responded to this by saying,

It is very important...for people to see that it is possible to sit down with Arab people and play. The orchestra is a human laboratory that can express to the whole world how to cope with the other.

These are extraordinary Jewish and Muslim people doing this. Surely we Christians should be the experts at this sort of

thing. We should be the ones who are the example because we claim to be the disciples of the Prince of Peace whose whole mission was to reconcile the world unto Himself, and Who sent us out to continue to witness to this reconciliation. Did you catch that the student from the Divan Orchestra's vision was limited to "learning how to cope with one another"? Jesus wants so much more for us than to "cope" with one another. He wants us to heal; He wants us to be reconciled.

I'm really getting tired of this word "tolerance"! We are always told to "tolerate" each other. I do not want to just tolerate you, I want to embrace you! I want to love you! I want to live together in peace; I want to uplift you for who you are, not just tolerate you. Jesus does not want us to just cope and tolerate each other, He wants us to heal. He wants us to be reconciled. He wants us to witness to His Kingdom of reconciliation.

One more person on the world scene, at least here in America, is Abraham Lincoln who many of you might consider to be our greatest president. He became a true Christian later in his life, and as a result, he was enabled to cast a vision as he anticipated the close of the cataclysmic Civil War. His words are very familiar; listen to them again now. He began by saying, "With malice toward none..." Can you imagine how that phrase sounded in 1865? The Southerners were full of bitterness and anger because the Yankees had burned down their homes, and the Yankees felt that their sons had died because of the Southerners' rebellion. Both sides were full of anger and sorrow and brokenness. In his Second Inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln said to the nation,

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right,

let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

My friends, you must know that our Lord Jesus knows how difficult this is, how much work there is to be done. Some of you may be reflecting on the people and situations that have been difficult in your life, and you are thinking that I have no idea what I am talking about; that I do not know the people you have had to deal with; that I have no idea of the situations you have faced. What I have said might sound fine for me up here in front, but that I do not know what you have had to experience. No, I do not know what you have had to deal with, but I do not have know because I know what the Holy Spirit can do, and I know what He has done. I know what we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are called to do. Perhaps you can relate to exactly what Isaiah means when in the first two verses of Isaiah 64 he says,

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains might quake at your presence—  
<sup>2</sup> as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!

He is asking the Lord to rip open the heavens and to come down to earth and do something because there is so much hurt and so much pain and so much sorrow in the world. He is asking the Lord to do amazing things just like He had done in the past. The Bible teaches us that He did just that! At His first coming, God did not make mountains quake or kindle fires or

make nations tremble; He came in the form of a gentle, sweet little baby and the heavens rejoiced!

This Sunday begins the season of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation. Do not waste it! Yes, we get involved in shopping and decorating, but Advent is primarily a spiritual time. It is a time to prepare our hearts to once again receive, perhaps more deeply than ever before, the Christ child. A time to make a spiritual pilgrimage to the manger in Bethlehem, and perhaps to receive Him genuinely for the very first time.

On our trip to Israel, we visit the place where this great miracle happened. Since the very first century, the Christians have known and identified the place where Jesus was born. It is now inside a church called The Church of the Nativity which was built in the time of the Crusades. One enters this church through a small, low door, not because people were shorter then, but because one must bow to the King. One can go down into the area of the actual birthplace which is located under an altar and marked by a star.

We do not worship the place, but when we visit I invite our people to reflect upon what happened there. What happened here was that Almighty God answered Isaiah's prayer. He intervened into human history by coming in person! Why did He do that? Isaiah gives us a clue in verses five and six of chapter 64.

You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;  
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we  
be saved?

<sup>6</sup> We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

It was necessary for Him to come because we are mired in our sins. We cannot justify ourselves before Almighty God, so God has taken care of it for us.

Many people, when asked whether they are going to heaven, say that they “hope so”. Some people think God is mad at them. To what gospel have they been listening? God came in the person of Jesus and He took care of the problem for us! In 2 Corinthians 5:19 Paul says, *“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”*

You see, Jesus is all about reconciliation, and the very first step is to reconcile us to Almighty God, which He achieved. It is our faith that justifies us; we are saved by the grace of God. Isaiah asked whether we were to be saved and God answered his prayer with a promise. Yes, Isaiah; we are saved! That is why the heavens were rejoicing on that great first Christmas Day. Jesus, which comes from the name “Joshua” or “Yehoshu’a” and means “Yahweh saves,” was born on that first Christmas day.

That is only half the story! It is only half the story because once we are saved, we recognize that Jesus is not only our Savior, He is also the Lord of our life and our faith in Him dictates how we are to live. Our mission, that much bigger “thing” of which we are a part, is to first witness to the gospel of reconciliation by testifying about Jesus with words. Second, we witness through the way we relate to others by how we demonstrate that gospel.

Last week, Dr. Pratt gave us a wonderful sermon about the



concept of being born again. He assured us that the phrase “born again” is not an invention of TV preachers. These are Jesus’ words! Jesus is saying that we must be transformed from the inside out by the power the Holy Spirit. Scripture says that we become a “new creation.” Our very nature, our spiritual DNA, is transformed. This causes us to live and to view life very differently from others and from the way we used to live and view it. Isaiah reflects this as well in Isaiah 64:8-9,

But now, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
<sup>9</sup> Be not so terribly angry, O Lord,  
and remember not iniquity forever.  
Behold, please look, we are all your people.

You see, when we are transformed by the power the Holy Spirit, we are like clay in God's hands. He shapes us the way He wants us to be, because our lives no longer belong to us, they belong to Him. When we submit to the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to become His instrument of reconciliation in the world. As a result, it is totally against our new nature to hold a grudge, to carry unforgiveness in our hearts, to harbor hatred or a judgmental attitude. It is impossible because we are being rebuilt in the image of our Savior Jesus.

Instead, whenever there is brokenness, wherever there is strife, wherever there is a collision between sinful people, someone needs to be willing to step into the breach, to take the risk of being the one who brings peace and reconciliation. In Matthew 5:9 Jesus said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*” Friends, **we** are the people who do this! If we are sons and daughters of God, we are called to take on this mission as disciples of Jesus and it can be hard, it can be

painful, it may require great patience and endurance. Sometimes when we are trying to walk the road with a person who is struggling, they are not receptive to what we want to offer so it may take a lot of time and endurance. How else can a disciple of Jesus live? To what would you want to commit your lives other than being His instruments of reconciliation in a broken world? My friends, this is how Christians transform families, transform marriages, transform communities, transform churches, and yes, even transform the world. This is one of the key reasons why God called the church into being in the first place. It is sad that even among Christians, there are those who do not embrace this vision and call to discipleship. They remain mired in self-righteous anger and fear, embracing the lies of Satan. But take heart; there is hope!

Advent is not only a time to prepare our hearts, to recall and receive the old story once again, to recall the historic event that is such an important part of our faith, but to look forward to the story yet to be completed. Jesus promised that He would return, and when He does, He is going to make all things right. Then just as Isaiah described, the mountains will be quaking, there will be fire and smoke, nations will be trembling, and leaders of the world will be shaking in their boots, because the Bible teaches us that every eye will see Him!

Just like the shepherds of old, we are watching and waiting for Jesus to come. In Acts 1:11 as Christ was ascending the angel told the disciples, *"This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."* What will He find when He returns? What will His church be like? What will He find that we are standing and living for? Will He find a redemptive community that has carried on His work of grace and reconciliation?

We can take the risk of being those kind of people because we know how the story ends. We have the Bible! We already know that Christ is the Victor and Satan is the loser! We know that the day will come when sin and death will be no more! We are not only part of the redemptive work that Jesus started, but we will be a part of the redemptive work that He will complete when He returns and establishes His Kingdom once and for all. **That** Kingdom will have no end! What a joyous blessing it is to know that we are called to live as citizens of **that** Kingdom.

What does that Kingdom look like? Our call to worship this morning included verses from chapter 11 of Isaiah where he says, *“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb... they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.”* This church is already filled with the knowledge of God. You already know Him. You already know of His love, you already know of His work, and we have committed our lives to Him.

This Advent season is an opportunity for you to examine all the relationships of your life and the modus operandi of how you relate to others: relationships in the past, relationships in the present. Do they reflect the Prince of Peace or do they reflect the natural ways of fallen humanity? How you answer that question will reveal the true condition of your heart. Who holds your heart? Does Jesus hold your heart or do the idols of the world hold your heart?

I pray that this advent season will be for you an Advent season like no other. I pray that your Lord Jesus will genuinely and completely claim your heart and your soul, and that during this season you will finally make peace and reconcile with the burdens from the past. Yes, the one you are thinking

about; I am talking about “that” person or “that” situation. Perhaps you will be inspired to take the initiative toward someone with whom your relationship is currently strained. Perhaps during this Advent, your heart will be so shaped that in the future you will not allow brokenness to happen in the first place. In this, God will be glorified in your life. To Him be all the glory. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen



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