

The Grammar of Advent: *Psalm 126; Luke 1:46b-55*

Norwalk Christian Church, December 14, 2014, Advent 3, Year B

Christmas has a way of messing with time. It is an in-between time. We get tripped up on our grammar, as things that were past tense become present, once again. Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's *Christmas Carol* wasn't the only one visited by ghosts of Christmas past, present and future this time of year.

We rewatch our favorite Christmas movies, movies we remember watching as kids. How many times are you going to watch Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer? Yet every year, we watch it again, as if for the first time.

As we see our kids, or grandkids, or great grandkids, tear open the packages in glee on Christmas morning, we can see ourselves doing the same, just like it was yesterday.

It may have been years since our loved ones were with us, and life has moved on. But this time of year, it seems without fail, the pain of their loss is as fresh as it was yesterday.

At Christmas time, we can't help but look back, and these memories cause us to look forward. Where do we want to be next year? What needs to change? What must be different? Who will we gather with next year, and who will be missing?

Once again this year, as we do every year, we gather at the nativity. We dress our kids up in costumes somewhat resembling what they might have worn back then. We reenact the biblical story, an ancient story, told for thousands of years, and lived out again, here and now.

We celebrate the coming of Jesus, God becoming flesh and living among us, yet still we sing, "Come, Thou Long-expected Jesus."

What is the grammar of Advent? In what verb tense do we sing? What are we celebrating? That Christ has come, as a baby in a manger, or that Christ is here among us now, or that Christ will one day come again? Is it Christmas past, or Christmas present, or Christmas future?

Christmas has a way of messing with time.

Scripture is of no help, this morning. We began our worship with the words from the Psalmist, sung many, many years ago. As she reviewed the history of God's people, she sang, (Psalm 126:1-2) "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 'The LORD has done great things for them.' ... 'The Lord has done great things for us.... Now, restore our fortunes, O Lord.'"

Hundreds of years later, another Psalmist sings, her voice still echoing through the ages. “Magnificat! My soul magnifies the Lord,” she proclaims. “The Lord *has* done great things for me... The Lord *has* scattered the proud... The Lord *has* brought down the powerful from their thrones... The Lord *has* filled the hungry with good things....”

Then; now. For them; but for us. “Already, God has done this!” they sing...yet, look around.

The Lord has scattered the proud? But did you see fans reactions when their favorite college football team didn’t make the playoffs?

The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones? But last I heard, the powerful were still manipulating the people, building up their arsenals and coffers in order to preserve their thrones.

The Lord has filled the hungry with good things? I read this week that some 805 million people in the world today do not have enough food to lead a healthy, active life. That's about one out of nine people on earth! (<http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>)

Yet here Mary sings. She sings of how blessed she is, yet her’s is a hard road ahead. The road of an unwed, pregnant teenager. A road covered in scandal. A road that leads right up to a cross, on which her promised baby will die. Blessed?

So which is it? What is the grammar of Advent? Are we blessed or *will we* be blessed? Has the Lord ALREADY scattered the proud, brought the powerful from their thrones and filled the hungry with good things, or are we asking Jesus to accomplish these things. Come, O long-expected Jesus, we sing.... But then we sing, “Joy to the World, the Lord is come!”

This past Wednesday, I came into the sanctuary while our choir was practicing. They were singing one of my favorite carols, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” Now, next week [in the 10:30 service], they will sing this song for us, a beautiful arrangement with singing and our Chalice bells. But since Marti is preaching next week, I want to talk about the song this week, to prepare us.

The song is based on the poem “Christmas Bells” by the famed poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow wrote the poem in 1864, in the midst of tragedy. The Civil War had gone on for years. A few before in 1861, Henry’s wife, Francis, died tragically in a house fire. While using a candle, hot wax dripped on Francis’ dress and it immediately ignited. Engulfed in flames, she ran into her husband’s study to protect her children. Henry followed her, throwing himself on her as he tried to put out the flames. She died the next day from her wounds, and Henry was too wounded to even attend her funeral.

The following Christmas day in 1862, the memories of that horrid night still filling Henry's mind, he wrote in his journal, " 'A merry Christmas' say the children, but that is no more for me." The next year, Longfellow received the news that his son Charles, only 17, had secretly enlisted in the Union army against his father's protests. Then, the news he feared the most: Charley contracted typhoid, and then was severely wounded in battle. Henry went himself to the battlefield hospital and brought his son home, expecting him to die, but...Charles survived. Maybe there was reason to hope?

Then, as Christmas Day 1864 approached, the Union celebrated the reelection of President Lincoln. Though the war was not yet over, with this reelection the end was in sight. That year, as Henry sat at his home, reflecting on the tragedy of the past years, he heard the church bells play from the neighborhood church. In that moment, Wadsworth picked up his pen, and wrote his famous poem. It starts off hopeful:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day, Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet, The words repeat, Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*The belfries of all Christendom Had rolled along The unbroken song Of peace on earth,
good-will to men!*

Then, hope begins to fade, as the poem turns to the realities of war:
*Then from each black accursed mouth The cannon thundered in the South, And with
the sound The carols drowned Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*It was as if an earthquake rent The hearth-stones of a continent, And made forlorn
The households born Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*And in despair I bowed my head; "There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong, And mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

There is so much in our world that "mocks the song" of peace on earth. Hate remains very strong. The hungry are still in need of food. The powerful still sit on their thrones of greed, violence and injustice, fighting peace and goodwill at every step.

And yet, here we are, singing the songs of hope, peace and joy.

We began our worship today focused on Joy, as we sang "Joy to the World." You had your hymnals out, following along with the words, though we've sung that song so much we know it by heart.

However, I bet a good number of you sang that first line wrong. "Joy to the world," what's the next line? "The Lord IS come." Yet, some of you, I'm sure, sang, "Joy to the World, the Lord HAS come." And you were wrong. :-)

It's a strange phrase. The Lord IS come. I don't know if it's grammatically correct or not. It's present tense...but it talks of things that happened before, and that will happen again.

What is the grammar of Advent? In what verb tense do we sing? Christmas past, Christmas present or Christmas future?

Yes. Advent encompasses it all.

Longfellow doesn't leave his great Christmas poem in despair. He ends it with a triumphant declaration of hope.

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

This is our song. This is our hope. And this Advent, we join triumphantly, with the Psalmist, with Longfellow, with Mary, and with all God's singers, declaring Joy to the World, the Lord is come.

Maybe not everywhere, not yet. There are still places that mock the song, corners of our world and our hearts that have not yet heard the bells on Christmas day.

But it's happening. It has begun. Now. Here. In our midst. Christ has come. Christ is come. And Christ will come again. Amen.