



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Politics of Advent

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Advent can be a deceptive season – in the midst of warm fuzzy early December, it suddenly becomes a bit dangerous. You see, Advent is the most political season of the church year. And trust me, I know that there are few things more dangerous than talking about politics in a pulpit. But at this time of year, it is important for us to talk about the messages within Christianity that engage the world on a very political level. All of the main characters of the Advent story, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary, and Jesus, bring us political messages.

First of all, it is a good idea to define and make some distinctions. The word politics, comes from an almost identical Greek word – *πολιτικός* (*politicos*) meaning “of or pertaining to citizens.” In its most neutral definition, politics is nothing more than the “processes by which groups of people make collective decisions.” Anytime a neighborhood association decides to contract for trash pickup or trim trees, they have made a political decision – one that affects the common life of the residents of the neighborhood. That’s the definition part; the distinctions that are necessary here help us to be clear about the difference between partisan politics and gospel topics. The apparent reality of the partisan nature of politics does not mean that the church should cede its moral authority to preach about justice and injustice. I will reiterate a promise that I have made to you before, I do not bring partisan politics into this pulpit, it’s not my job to tell you how to vote. However, I will not shy away from thorny issues but will talk about them through the lens of the Gospel. And in Advent, that lens is as far reaching as the Hubble telescope.

Starting with Isaiah...today’s passage is full of “comfort” and consolation. It was written during the time of Israel’s captivity in Babylon. They were slaves again, a circumstance that came about through the violent invasion of Jerusalem. The Babylonian army destroyed the beautiful city and carted off the residents. The people were not free. So here we have war and enslavement – neither of which happens without politics. The voice of the prophet brings solace and hope. However, if you are paying attention, there is another message within these words, one of a price that the people of Israel have been paying. Jewish history has generally interpreted the time in exile as punishment for having forsaken God’s covenant and expectations. And how did that forsaking come about – generally decisions made by those with power that affected the vulnerable people. In his book *Isaiah; Spirit of Courage, Gift of Tears*, Daniel Berrigan said, “Isaiah offers the usual double-edged message here; one of comfort and one of reminding. The social enslavement...did not occur in a moral blur or blank. Sin preceded the violation of the covenant. The offense was especially heinous in the violations of justice and peacemaking...” A significant part of the covenant with God revolved around the people of Israel organizing their common life justly. God disapproves when political decisions make life hard for people – particularly the vulnerable, most often identified as widows and orphans, the poor and the resident aliens.

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John the Baptist. The first indication that he was a political figure and not just a religious one is that what he was doing got him killed – King Herod did not like it when John pointed out some of his moral shortcomings. And because Herod had political power, he could have John dragged in from the desert, imprisoned and eventually beheaded. But even before that, John was upsetting the Temple authorities by his public demonstrations on the shores of the River Jordan. John was protesting the corruption and collusion between the religious leaders and the Roman authorities. The Temple had become a very political place. John was also a central figure in the messianic fever of the time – he had gathered quite a following and that made him dangerous to the political powers of the day.

And then there's Mary, mother mild, sweet and gentle instrument of God's plan on earth. Her song, the *Magnificat*, says it all.

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed;
the Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.*

How lovely, very meek and mild sounding...

He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation to generation.

*He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered the proud in their conceit,
Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly.*

He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Mary, what are you doing –that's sounds very political! But Mary, undeterred, reminds everyone...

*He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to remember his promise of mercy,
The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children for ever.*

Mary's song is so dangerous and subversive that in the 1980s it was banned in Guatemala. It's dangerous when people who are oppressed and desperate are given hope and that's exactly what the *Magnificat* does. It very intentionally targets and shakes up the powerful. The idea is not to punish those who have, but to bring about balance and justice to the communities of the world. That is Gospel politics; it's not partisan although it may upset anyone who would work against justice for the poor, food for the hungry, fuel oil for the cold, breathable air for children with asthma and all of the other things wrapped up in Mary's song. She stands as the not so silent witness against such things in all of her Advent glory.

Today, Mark the Evangelist proudly proclaims, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God." Never forget that he is Mary's son as well. In Jesus, the embodiment of God's vision for humankind, the end of the old order has begun. The world into which Jesus was born, and the world into which we have been born, is filled with the powerful making decisions that benefit them and their friends with precious little concern for those on the other end of the spectrum. In Jesus, the revolution has begun. My New Testament professor Ron Allen used to refer to Jesus as the invasion point of the new age in which the world will be made new. The old ways will be turned over. This is the language and message of Advent.

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So what do we do with this? There are lots of options here. We can do what the church has often done which is to pretend that we didn't hear it and let the "no politics in church" rule go unchallenged. Or we can work to organize our common life here at Trinity as if it is always Advent – always helping to prepare the world for the promised time of fairness, abundance and love and regularly engaging in some reflection on our own priorities. We can keep the Advent messages close by as we take part in the common life of Branford, Connecticut, our nation and the world– developing a process for evaluating what our government and our representatives are doing as seen through an Advent lens. We could engage in some wonderful conversations around here about the difference between Gospel politics and every other kind. We can look within our own hearts and minds and ask, "How am I doing as an Advent person?"

In Advent we keep company with some dangerous folks who dare to challenge the power with talk of freedom, hope and justice. If we dare to walk with them, if we have the courage, we will be given all that we need as the Body of Christ for the world as God intends it and we'll all be ready for Christmas.

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