

WHOSE BIRTHDAY IS IT ANYWAY ?

I remember seeing a PEANUTS comic strip several years ago that had LUCY talking with her brother, LINUS, who as usual, was listening with his THUMB in his mouth and his SECURITY blanket tucked up against his EAR. And Lucy says: *Linus, I'm going to tell you something that I have NEVER told ANYONE before. Do you SEE that HILL over there? Someday I'm going OVER that hill, and I'M going to find the ANSWER to my DREAMS! SOMEDAY, I'm going OVER that hill, and I'M going to find HAPPINESS and fulfillment! I think that, for me, ALL the answers to LIFE lie over the grassy slopes of that HILL!* PROMPTLY Linus removes his THUMB from his mouth, POINTS toward the hill, and says: *You know, perhaps there is ANOTHER child, on the OTHER side of that hill, who is looking THIS way, and thinking that ALL the answers to life lie on THIS side of the hill!* Well, LUCY looks at Linus for a moment, and then turns TOWARD the hill and shouts: *FORGET it, kid!*

Well, that comic strip REMINDS me of this season of Advent, because EVERY Advent, it's like WE stand facing that HILL. And the prophet, ISAIAH, paints us a BEAUTIFUL word-picture of WHAT it's like on the OTHER side. THERE, even the DESERT will bloom with abundant flowers! THERE, the eyes of the BLIND will be OPENED, and the EARS of the deaf will be CLEARED; the LAME will leap like DEER, and the tongues of the DUMB will sing with JOY! THERE, sorrow and sadness will FLEE, and we will see the SPLENDOR of God! WOW! WHAT a picture! Well, HOW would WE react if WE were told that there are people on the OTHER side of that hill looking for the SAME thing on THIS side? Most LIKELY, we'd be like LUCY, shouting: *FORGET it! NO such place EXISTS over here!*

However, THEN we come face-to-face with today's NEW Testament Lesson, and it's CONFUSING -- confusing because, IN it, we see JESUS telling the disciples of JOHN the Baptist that HE came to build that VERY kind of WORLD! HE came to TEACH people that looking for happiness over the HILL somewhere is NOT why we were CREATED! We were NOT created to look ELSEWHERE for fulfillment, but to find fulfillment by making THIS world READY to receive the Christ; making THIS world READY to receive EMMANUEL, which AS I said, simply means *GOD is WITH us*; making THIS world READY to receive its SAVIOR, who will be BORN in our HEARTS, and thus, SAVE us, and SAVE our world, from the DEVASTATING walls of separation by which HUMANKIND divides and imprisons it!

Yes, THAT'S what Advent is about! It's NOT about the birth of a cute, little BABY on Christmas! It's about the birth of God's SAVIOR! It's about the birth of God in DISGUISE, God WITH us! So DURING Advent, OUR job is to PREPARE for HIM! You know: it's STRANGE! We Christians, and especially MINISTERS, often have what's called a *MESSIAH complex*. In other words, we think that WE can go out and SAVE the world! Well, the point of ADVENT is to understand that we don't HAVE to save the world! In fact, only God CAN save this world. No, what WE are called to do is to go out and become like John the BAPTIST, to go out and PREPARE the WAY for God to SAVE the world by making hearts EVERYWHERE ready to RECEIVE our Savior! And AS I said a few WEEKS ago, we DO that by remembering WHOSE birthday it IS that we are PREPARING for! And, IN this CONSUMER-driven society of ours, where the MALLS today will be far BUSIER than the CHURCHES, remembering

WHOSE birthday it IS is NO easy task! And I FEAR that you and I may TRY once again THIS year, to help KIDNAP the baby Jesus and hold Him RANSOM for MILLIONS of dollars!

Now, DON'T get me WRONG! I'm NOT trying to play SCROOGE! I like Christmas and sharing gifts each year JUST as much as ANYONE! It's a WONDERFUL tradition, but it's a tradition **gone WILD!** It's a tradition that's GOTTEN out of HAND! EACH year, we INDULGE children who are already SO indulged that they literally have ROOMS full of toys and games! YET, they have the NERVE to get UPSET if they DON'T get JUST the right TOY or GIFT. And EACH year, we AGONIZE over what to get GRANDPA, because he doesn't NEED anything, because ALL year long, whenever he WANTED something, he just went out and BOUGHT it. But WE feel CHEAP if we don't buy something WONDERFUL for Grandpa! And EACH year, WE wait to see what WE are going to get for Christmas, as IF it were OUR birthday! Yes, it's a BEAUTIFUL tradition, but a tradition gone WILD! And to me: that's SAD, because we're SUPPOSED to be celebrating the birthday of JESUS. SO, our GIFTS ought to BE for JESUS! And they OUGHT to be gifts that will help HIM find ROOM to be BORN in people's HEARTS! And, THAT'S WHY I'm urging ALL of us this Advent and Christmas to consider giving gifts to JESUS. Now, I'm NOT saying: *Don't give GIFTS to the people that you LOVE.* We ALL want to DO that, of COURSE! But at the SAME time, KEEP remembering WHOSE birthday this IS, and put a GOOD deal of your THOUGHT, ENERGY and resources into giving HIM gifts as well!

HOW do we DO that? Well, we DO it by remembering what Jesus TOLD us in Matthew 25, when He said: *Whatever you DO to even the LEAST of your brothers and sisters, you DO it ME.* SO, we give gifts to JESUS whenever we give gifts to help the poor, the hungry, the weak, the grieving, the SICK, and ALL who are neglected, forgotten or abused by our society and world. And there are LOTS of WAYS to give gifts to JESUS.

Here's ONE example, found in this TRUE story, a story in SONG written by a woman named Deanna Edwards. It's entitled: *Wanted: One Family.* LISTEN to it:

SONG: *Wanted: One Family* by Deanna Edwards

It's quite a SONG, isn't it? Well, that's ONE way to give gifts to JESUS. We can bring someone with NO family into OUR family. Another way is for OUR family to buy GIFTS for ANOTHER family, a family in NEED. And there are LOADS of OTHER ways to give gifts to Jesus! I talked about SOME of them a few weeks ago, when I talked about buying FAIR TRADE products when we buy gifts for people, in order to insure that the people who PRODUCED these gifts earn a LIVING wage for their labor. OR, you can contribute to worthy causes in HONOR of loved ones, colleagues or classmates to whom you need to give GIFTS. Those who gave gifts to CHILDREN this year through our GIVING TREE, or worked on our RISE dinner, have ALSO given gifts to Jesus. Well, MY hope and prayer that ALL of us will do our VERY best this Christmas to give gifts to Jesus by SERVING or supporting our neighbors in NEED, both here and around the globe, because that's ONE way that we can TRULY prepare room in our hearts and in the hearts of others, so that our Savior CAN be BORN into this world and MAKE this world a better place for ALL of us. Yes, it BEGINS with EACH one of US, for HOW can we expect to change our CULTURE until WE change OURSELVES?

So, let's DO it! Let's change OURSELVES! We JUST need to remember that we don't need to LOOK over the next HILL for our FULFILLMENT! We can find it right HERE, right NOW, in Jesus Christ, who says to US what He said to the disciples of JOHN the Baptist: *GO*

and tell John what you SEE and HEAR: the BLIND recover their sight, the LAME walk, the DEAF hear, and the DEAD are raised to LIFE! Yes friends: THAT'S where our FULFILLMENT lies: in CHRIST! You know: 5, 10, 15 YEARS from now, it's NOT going to matter how many TOYS we bought our children this Christmas. Only the LOVE with which their gifts are GIVEN will be REMEMBERED! But what WILL matter -- 5, 10, 15 YEARS from now -- is WHAT we did to HELP the poor, to FEED the hungry, to SHELTER the homeless, and to WORK for JUSTICE and PEACE and HEALTH for one and all! Yes, THAT'S what we will feel GOOD about, because THAT'S doing GOD'S work! And whether we realize it or not, doing GOD'S work is what LIFE is all ABOUT! THAT is where our FULFILLMENT lies!

You know, LINUS said something ELSE, in ANOTHER Peanuts comic strip, that APPLIES to US this Advent. Charlie Brown is COMPLAINING about world CONDITIONS. And in the MIDDLE of Charlie's pessimistic OUTBURST, Linus INTERRUPTS him and SAYS: *Charlie, I think the world is better TODAY than it was just 6 YEARS ago.* Well, THIS just adds FUEL to Charlie's FIRE, and he SHOUTS at Linus: *How can you SAY that the world is BETTER than it was 6 YEARS ago? DON'T you read the PAPER or watch TV? HOW can you say it's BETTER?* And very quietly and confidently, Linus responds: *Because I'M in it NOW!* Well friends, whenever we DO the work of Christ, WE can say the SAME thing! The world IS a better place because WE'RE in it! And THAT feels GOOD! It's FULFILLING to be ABLE to SAY that, ISN'T it? SO, let's REMEMBER, during this Advent season, that it's a GREAT time to work at MAKING this world a BETTER place, because it's a GREAT time to give gifts to JESUS by giving to our neighbors in need, for *WHATEVER we DO, even to the LEAST of our brothers and sisters, we DO it HIM.* Amen.