

Christ is the answer. What is the problem?

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9

There is a remarkable verse in the first chapter of 2 Corinthians which says: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Corinthians 1:20). We might paraphrase that by saying: "Christ is the answer: What is the problem?" Christ is the answer. That's set, but what is the problem?

One of the missteps we make is to define away the problem. On this first Sunday of Advent, as we look to the year ahead of us, we ask: Why is it the way it is?

The problem, very simply, is sin. At this answer just image how eyes roll as others say: "There goes those Lutherans again! Why do they have such a hang-up about sin?" Well, what is the problem?

Many people today understand sin sociologically as a kind of groupthink. A group decides that this is the way it should be, and that is the way it shouldn't be, and we are called upon to conform to the group. The trouble is today that there are all kinds of groups. There are groups in the past, groups elsewhere in the world, and we end up saying: "It's all relative."

In fact, sociologists have picked up a word "anomie," from a Greek word describing sin, "*anomia*," which means meaninglessness. People end up in meaninglessness because who knows what's true? If "the group" says so, maybe it's better to go along. But where is there any meaning?

The second way the problem is looked at is by psychology. And psychology says that everything is really a matter of feelings and experience. Sometimes people get caught in thinking "conscience" provides a rudder in life, as in Jiminy Crickett's advice: "Always let your conscience be your guide." But "conscience" in Paul does not mean that we have something built into us by which we know right and wrong. In fact, the idea that we have some built into us also leads to meaninglessness because why would I be the one to determine what is final? It is really playing God. That leads to a kind of relativism and meaninglessness.

Forgetting for a moment about the world out there, and thinking instead about the world we call the church, people say: "We know what the Bible says." That

commonly means the Ten Commandments and a few more things. But exactly what do they know, or what do they think they know?

There is a Biblical word for sin that means “missing the mark.” It’s as if you are shooting at a target, and you miss it. Some say that the important thing is to try. Do the best you can. You may not hit a bullseye, but you may get close enough. The other word that comes from this thinking about the Ten Commandments is the word “obedience” and its correlate, “disobedience.” The idea is that you obey the Commandments, you do good, and that’s good for you. If you break the Commandments, you sin, and that’s bad for you. Of course, if good things happen to you that must mean that you did good things, and if evil things happen, that must mean that you did evil things and were sinful.

There is one more little bit that people know: There are sins of omission. We struggle with that because we say we can’t be help responsible for things we don’t know. After World War II there were Germans who said that they didn’t know what was being done to the Jewish people. There is a difference between “know” and “know.” They didn’t see with their own eyes people being executed. But they knew. Everybody knew.

We have that problem. If we’re not an eyewitness to an evil, we excuse ourselves saying the sins of omission don’t apply to us.

What does the Bible say about sin? Luther often quoted Isaiah 64:6: “All our good (righteous) deeds are filthy rags.” Under this judgment all the ideas we have that there are good deeds and bad deeds are wiped away. Lest we think that this verse is an outlier, that it is only one verse and only in the Old Testament, consider what Paul writes in Romans 3:10 following: “None is righteous, no not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one.” He goes on in Romans 3:20: “No human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

We know this is true, yet commonly after a funeral someone will say: “He’s surely in heaven because he was a good man.” As if that had anything to do with it!

The problem is we’re all caught. Lest we think in some way it isn’t quite so bad, it is important to remember in the New Testament that sin and death are the same thing. In Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.” 1 Corinthians 15:56: “The sting of

death is sin." The word "sting" here is referring to the scorpion's tail. To say "the sting of death is sin" means the cause of death is sin.

We all are then caught. Anybody who has any illusion that: "Well, I'm not so bad," faces the fact that death tells us all that we are all equally caught and equally judged sinful.

What then do we do? Is it hopeless? That directs us to the message for today.

Hopelessness is itself sin because then we do not trust in the fact that the Lord has acted. He acted in Jesus Christ to solve the problem of sin and death. And that's what we are celebrating. In Advent we are looking ahead to Christmas and through Christmas to Good Friday and Easter because that's what it's about.

What it is about is that God has taken care of it, and he's taken care of it through his cross. Luther wrote that anyone who diminishes the importance of sin also diminishes the importance of the cross. The cross is the answer because here the holy one took on sin. The cross tells us how bad sin is; it is so bad that God himself came and died on the cross for us.

Anytime we think that the problem isn't serious we have to think about what God saw as the necessary answer. Thank God that's what he did so that we have a **sure hope** as it says in 1 Peter 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to **a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. . . ."

And the Gospel message today and throughout the season of Advent is: Wake up and watch. See what the problem is as well as the answer. Amen.