

# “Have You Caught the Advent Virus?”

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – December 11, 2022*

*Isaiah 35:1-10*

It is a classic tale: good vs. evil, the powers of darkness vs. the powers of light, the virtuous vs. the corrupt; it is ... Walt Disney's cartoon battle between the apparently befuddled old Merlin and the purple wickedness of the "marvelous mad Madam Mim!"

In case this dramatic duel has slipped your mind, or you do not have children or grandchildren the right age to force you to relive this battle on a daily viewing basis, let me refresh your memory. Merlin and Mim are fighting it out because Mim wants to eat Merlin's student, none other than the young King Arthur. Obviously, a lot is at stake. The witch and the wizard agree to certain rules before their battle, pledging among other things that neither of them will turn into a purple-spotted, fire-breathing dragon or turn invisible altogether.

But as the contest heats up, the wicked Mim cheats and turns herself into the fire-breathing dragon. She explains away her dishonesty by claiming she is a "plain old fire-breathing dragon," which she never promised anything about. Just as Mim is about to incinerate the hapless Merlin, he apparently disappears. Enraged, the dragon-Mim accuses Merlin of breaking their rules by becoming invisible. The magician's seemingly disembodied voice floats back to Mim and announces, "I am not gone. And I am not invisible. I am a germ."

A germ? In fact, Merlin has transformed himself into a very specific and quite potent dragon-virus, which immediately reduces the dragon-Mim into a pathetically sneezing, coughing, broken-out-into-spots, bedridden mess. Merlin triumphs by using his brains and by dramatically demonstrating that size does not matter.

Not long ago, a warning of another germ or virus came to me via cyberspace channels:

**WARNING ... WARNING ... ADVENT VIRUS IS GOING OUT:**

Be on the alert for symptoms of inner HOPE, PEACE, JOY, AND LOVE. The hearts of a great many have already been exposed to this virus, and it is possible that people everywhere could come down with it in epidemic proportions. This could pose a serious threat to what has, up to now, been a fairly stable condition of conflict in the world.

Some signs and symptoms of THE ADVENT VIRUS:

- A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than on fears based on past experiences.
- An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.
- A loss of interest in judging other people.
- A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.
- A loss of interest in conflict.
- A loss of the ability to worry. (This is a very serious symptom.)
- Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
- Contented feelings of connectedness with others and nature.
- Frequent attacks of smiling.
- An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.
- An increased susceptibility to the love extended by others as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend it ourselves.

Please send this warning out to all your friends. This virus can and has affected many people.

Much of the world is still trying to deal with Covid. Millions have died and more were very sick. It divided much of the country between vaxers and non-vaxers. There is not one person on this earth who has not been touched by the effects of Covid. So, in writing this sermon, I worried that the idea of a virus may be too soon to discuss. But then I realize that it is just the opposite. This is the perfect time to poke a bit of fun at it, but also to realize, we need to catch a virus that will strengthen our faith.

The Merlin virus is one we want to avoid; the Messiah Virus is one we want to catch! Have you come down with the virus yet? No? Well, it is the church's job to infect you!

To nurture along this tiny and invisible "Advent Virus" until it can grow and spread into epidemic proportions, is the mission of the church's Christmas season itself. We cannot properly prepare for the arrival of Christ in our midst until we come down with this fever and try our utmost to spread it around. During this season we learn how to be "Typhoid Mary's" of this Advent or Messiah Virus.

But beware: There are a lot of germs floating around out there that will try to mimic the "Advent Virus." How can Christians be sure they are infected with the real thing? How can we be sure we are not just suffering from a disease that only imitates some of the classic symptoms of the "Advent Virus," like the "Consumer Virus?"

Today's gospel text has John the Baptist essentially asking the same question of Jesus. How do we know you are "THE ONE WHO IS TO COME" (v. 3)? What are the symptoms your presence evokes in my body, mind and spirit? It should be noted that earlier in Matthew's gospel, at the start of Jesus' public ministry, John seemed more convinced of Jesus' genuine nature. In 3:14, John had hesitated to baptize Jesus with John's famous water baptism, humbly claiming that "I NEED TO BE BAPTIZED BY YOU, AND DO YOU COME TO ME?" But time and perhaps the cold reality of Herod's prison cell had apparently cooled John's Advent fever. Now he wants to see evidence and hear proofs of Jesus' messianic ministry.

How did Jesus respond to this challenge? Jesus responds to John's disciples by providing them with a litany of symptoms, which when combined can lead to only one accurate diagnosis about Jesus' identity. *THE BLIND SEE, THE LAME WALK, LEPERS ARE CLEANSED, THE DEAF HEAR, THE DEAD ARE RAISED, THE POOR RECEIVE GOOD NEWS (11:5).*

Do you want to catch the Advent Virus, but don't know how? There is at least one simple way to catch any virus: Expose yourself to the virus you want to catch.

What do parents with several young children do when the first one catches chicken pox? Attempt to protect the other children from the potent pox? No! Often, they will place the healthy children in the same room with the infected child. They will allow them to play together, watch TV together in the hope that they, too, will catch the virus, so that this childhood disease will visit all the children at the same time.

Want to catch the Advent Virus? Expose yourself to people who have it! Search out the opportunities to revisit the meaning of Christmas, to flee the madness of the mall, to mingle with those for whom the Messiah is a meaningful presence in their lives. Find new ways to serve those who have less. Give of yourself and your resources to the homeless, the hungry, the lost and the hurt. Try to find Christ in the eyes of others that we find ourselves in conflict with. Start to pray for specific people in your life each and every day, asking God to bless them or

to help them. Seek out and become a vital part of the community of the infected and inflamed. You'll catch the Advent Virus every time!

As an Advent Virus carrier, you will now want to spread the "infection" to others. Rather than modeling the typical consumerist attitude that comes with the secular observance of this time of year, insist on spreading the Advent viral infection of joy, thoughtfulness, reflection and renewal.

The Advent Virus. The Messiah Virus. Catch it and spread it! Amen.