I have something of an Advent tradition where on the first Sunday of Advent I preach a very cranky slightly unhinged sermon with a title along the lines of “It’s not Christmas yet you miserable sinners.” It has served me well for many years, but I am going ease up and do something a little different this year. For while I know that the Christmas season starts on December 25th and lasts for twelve days until Epiphany. And I also know that Advent is really a more penitential season like Lent. However, based on how big of jerks we have been to each other in this country all year, it seems to me that, to quote Johnny Mathis, we might need a little Christmas right this very minute. Seriously, look at how much hatred and distrust there is between citizens of our country. I read a survey recently where Democrats and Republicans were asked to come up with words that described members of the other party. The leading words for Democrats to describe Republicans were “Racist, Bigoted and Sexist” whereas Republicans chief word to describe Democrats was “Spiteful.” And for good measure around 20% of each party described the other as evil. Can we really go on as a country if every citizen hates the half of it that does not agree with them about politics? So I think maybe extending the Christmas season a little longer this year might not be the worst of ideas. Yes and before I start getting letters accusing me of being a sellout, let me also acknowledge that I am fully aware that what society in general calls the Christmas Season or the Spirit of Christmas and all the other secular adornments that have been clamped onto the remembrance of the birth of Christ are not strictly speaking what Linus told us that Christmas was all about. However, the idea of being decent to one other that permeates secular Christmas understandings can actually be Biblical, in fact they can even fit in with Advent. And honestly, we could do a lot worse.

In our reading from Isaiah today we hear this rather famous passage, “For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Think about the passage and the idea of nation not lifting up sword against nation. In order for this to happen, that is in order for people to stop fighting, there has to be a certain amount of trust and goodwill towards one another. And while it seems simple and maybe even cliché part of “Christmas spirit” can be just trying to get along with people and building up the trust that is required for nation not lifting up sword against nation.

One of my favorite themes to return to now and again is the idea of doing the small things of which we are capable. That is rather than trying to change the world maybe we could try and change ourselves and that which we come in contact on a day-to-day basis. And when you cut through the commercialism and other nonsense that goes along with the Christmas season you do find a shared understanding that we are to be a little better to each other than we are during the rest of the year. Just like the prophecy that Isaiah gives us this morning where the animosity and acrimony that exists between peoples ceases and a certain generosity of spirit reigns in its place. And so while Advent is a season of preparation and the secular Christmas season is something of an uncontrollable monster there is an overlap between the two. And that overlap is that on some level both are asking us to be better than we usually are.

In the writings of Thomas Aquinas, he talks about virtues and habits. The quick version of this understanding is that he believes we develop good habits by repeatedly doing virtuous things. What this means in practicality is that there is a real possibility that when we first start behaving virtuously we may not enjoy doing it at all, but eventually with enough repetition this virtuous behavior becomes a habit, and when it becomes a habit it becomes something that we are able to do with ease. And so maybe part of our Lenten discipline could be to develop the virtuous habit of loving our neighbor no matter who they are, because that is the only way that we are going to bring about the vision of Isaiah. This isn’t easy, I know that it’s a whole lot easier for me to stand up here and talk about than it is to actually do it.

Somehow it seems that the presidential campaign is now a perpetual phenomenon, as soon as someone is elected the next day candidates start announcing their campaigns. I am told this is Jimmy Carter’s fault who started campaigning in December of 1974 for the 1976 election. But enough about that, the item I want to focus on is the promises that most presidential candidates make to unify the country. Most candidates have some sort of version of the statement we are not the divided states of America but the United States of America. The problem with these statements is that politicians’ views of unity are predicated on everyone agreeing with them. This is why we are so cynical of politicians because unity on their terms will simply not happen because people are always going to have disagreements. When my son Auggie was little he was being stubborn about something and so I told him that he needed to be more flexible to which he responded, “I will be flexible when you let me have what I want.” Now as adults we tend not to be that straightforward about our self-centeredness but it is there nonetheless. We will love our fellow man when they act the way we think they are supposed to act. But part of the vision we see in Isaiah comes from people loving one another the way God loves us. And so something for us to overlap in this season of Advent with what the rest of the world calls the Christmas season is to practice loving people not for who they are but rather loving them despite how they are.

And so in the spirit of merging secular Christmas with the Advent season let’s take a moment and reflect on that most ancient of Nativity commemorations *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. If you remember the plot on Christmas Eve the Grinch sneaks into Whoville accompanied by a great soundtrack and takes every item related to Christmas. But the miraculous thing is that the next morning when the Who’s down in Whoville discover what has happened they do not accuse their neighbors of stealing their stuff or do anything else negative but instead continue on like they did every other Christmas by gathering together and singing. This leads the Grinch to speak some of his most memorable lines in television history as he tries to understand what was happening. He said, “‘It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes, or bags!’" He puzzled and puzzed till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more!” As we enter this season of Advent may we understand that Christian perhaps means a little bit more. To truly prepare and to truly bring forth the vision that Isaiah gives us today we need to work to develop the virtue of loving our fellow man, not just the ones that we agree with and not just the ones that are nice to us, but by loving everyone. We need to prepare our hearts and souls so that when we say Merry Christmas it is not just a cliché but means something about a way of living that is lovely and good and wonderful. And so Merry Advent to all and may we truly be prepared for Christ’s coming now and forevermore.