

Advent 4, year B  
December 18, 2011  
**Romans 16:25-27, Hymnal #66**

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.*

This has always been one of my favorite hymns. It is #1 in the Hymnal 1940 and one of the first hymns that I learned to play on the organ with the pedals. This hymn text is just one of the thousands that Charles Wesley penned. The phrase that particularly drew me in is “let us find our rest in thee.”

What an attractive word “rest” is for us weary ones. The Church in its wisdom set the season of Advent right before the Twelve Days of Christmas as a time for reflection about the great mystery of the Incarnation – God’s revelation of Himself in human form. And yet, the run-up to December 25<sup>th</sup> is hardly reflective and quiet. It seems that the health of our economy is completely tied up with Santa and his elves and consumerism should be our one and only focus. Hopefully, this hour of worship during these four Sundays in Advent have provided you a place and a time to briefly rest.

There is so much more that is going on biblically at the birth of Christ. The second lesson this morning from Romans – the concluding verses of praise in this important letter of Paul – opens up the huge scope of the Gospel narrative/the Good News of the entire Bible. At the Incarnation, Christ’s redemptive and liberating rule is finally revealed in all its stages, from prophecy through the Incarnation to present sovereignty and final triumph; it bears individual, communal, and ultimately cosmic dimensions.

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us –*

Way back in the beginning we were created in the image of God.

*So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27*

In the beginning of time as we know it, we acknowledged our proper place in God’s good creation. God created us (and still is present at every conception) good and at perfect peace with Himself and all of creation. The ideal human disposition is praise of God. The perfect mode of being human is to live for God’s glory.

As we hear in the concluding verse of Romans ... “to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ!” (16:27)

Praise of God is an ideal, not a present reality, because humanity, in the Apostle Paul’s view, has been drawn away from its natural state. Sin, and humanity’s cooperation with Sin, has distorted humanity so that, typically, human beings look to themselves and look after themselves as if God did not exist. The praise of God has become foreign. What is normal and very much sought after is the praise of humanity, of ourselves. Most of us thoroughly enjoy being the center of attention and praise, at least some of the time.

This is an attitude that allows fear and bondage to creep in. As any non-parish individual is quick to observe, most churches have lots of self-centered, self-promoting pew sitters. The question is whether we recognize our own mindset and attendant behavior.

But God has always offered us another way to be and to act. And because we have obviously forgotten God's way, our Romans passage speaks the truth about the "mystery" of God's plan using three verbs – "kept secret," "now disclosed" and "is made known."

1. Since creation and despite our fall into self-centered behavior, God has had a master plan all along. Paul writes that God's intention for humankind and all of creation was "kept secret for long ages" – but was it really? A careful reading of the Old Testament lays out a clear path to walk with God in peace. For example, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments as a guide. God gave the sacrificial system at the Temple in Jerusalem to re-establish relationship with God and neighbor.

2. This mystery/the plan is now disclosed/made very plain to see in the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. Jesus, Himself points back to many places in the Old Testament that refer to Him and His role in God's plan.

*And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. Luke 24:27*

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. John 3:16-17*

Jesus modeled the way of perfect peace with God – the way of the "obedience of faith." At the Cross, by Jesus' willing obedience to God's plan, perfect peace, everlasting peace was re-established between God, humanity and all creation. Jesus showed the way, opened the veil to rest, eternal rest and peace. Through the sending of the Holy Spirit into our hearts, Jesus has given us the power to live for God's glory in a disposition of praise. The ball is in our court now. We have been given the power to be God-centered.

3. And finally, God commissions us to "make known" this mystery of God's loving plan throughout the world. I don't find this commission burdensome, not at all. With great thanksgiving for the peace and rest that God has offered me through Jesus' birth, ministry, death, resurrection and exaltation, I want to offer God's freedom from fears and release from sins to all I come in contact with.

First we must accept God's loving presence in our lives – accept the gift of faith which Jesus freely offers to all burdened and weary ones. That faith leads to a life of obedience and true freedom.

My prayer for each of you is that you will take some time during this last week before Christmas to feel the loving strength that God wants to gift you with for the open proclamation of the real reason for the season – Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

*God rest you merry, gentleman, let nothing you dismay;  
remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day,  
to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray.  
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy;  
O tidings of comfort and joy! Hymnal #105*