

I'm not really into animated cartoon/movies—although "Frozen 2" is all the rage these days. But many of the Disney animated films are classics. I know I immediately think of "Sleeping Beauty", "Cinderella", and "Fantasia". But there's another one called the "Sword and the Stone" that is at least a classic tale: good vs. evil, the powers of darkness vs. the powers of light, the virtuous vs. the corrupt. This film pits the apparently befuddled old Merlin the good magician against the purple wickedness of the "'Mad Madam Mim!"

In case this dramatic duel has slipped your mind, let me briefly refresh your memory, because it's really a clever clash. 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, fire-breathing dragon or become invisible altogether.

Naughty Mim almost immediately breaks her promise and becomes the fire-breathing dragon. Just as Mim is about to incinerate poor Merlin, he apparently disappears—seemingly breaking another of their battle rules. Mim is enraged. She thinks breaking rules is only for her. But then Merlin'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, and broken-out-in-spots mess. Merlin triumphs by using his brains and by dramatically demonstrating that size doesn't matter.

Unfortunately, there are some other potent viruses going around that we should be warned about. One of the big ones seems to peak in the summer months but extends to the holidays: the computer virus. The chief vectors are teenagers and children—although there are a lot of adults who are very infected. Many American families now own not just one computer, but one computer per person, along with iPads and "smart phones." Along with long hours of screen time for communication (such as emails and Facebook, Instagram), time-wasting game-ware has soared, making millions and billions of dollars from the very infected. If any of these devices fail, we are told to take two aspirins and call the computer's doctor. (Usually the Genius Bar at the Apple store—I use that term loosely!—and the Geek Squad.)

The virus that most of us catch during this season of the year is the shopping virus. It used to be that shopping malls were our modern cathedrals of consumption. Not so much anymore. I even found a parking space the other day when I went to Hamilton Mall! Now we do a lot of shopping on-line thanks to Amazon Prime. Nevertheless, the shopping virus is still alive and well.

Not long ago, a warning of another germ or virus came to me via cyberspace channels: "Warning....Warning....Advent Virus is Going Around.

Be on 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 and despair in the world.

Here are some of the 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 conflict.
- A loss of the ability to worry. (This is a very serious symptom.)
- Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
- Feelings of contentment.
- Frequent attacks of smiling.
- An increased susceptibility to accepting love from others as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend that love to them.

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

You know, the Merlin virus from the cartoon is one we want to avoid. The Advent Virus is actually one we want to catch! Have you come down with the Advent Virus yet? Uh-oh. Did you know that it’s the church’s job—our job—to spread the infection!

To nurture along this tiny, invisible “advent Virus” until it can grow and spread into pandemic proportions is actually the mission of the church’s Christmas season itself. We can’t 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 need to learn how to be “Typhoid Marys” of this Advent Virus.

But be aware: 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 aren’t just suffering from a disease that only imitates tiny parts of the “Advent Virus?”

Today’s gospel passage 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 elicits in my body, mind and spirit?

We don’t usually think about it, but earlier in Matthew’s gospel at the start of Jesus’ public ministry, John seemed more convinced of Jesus’ genuine nature—who Jesus really is. In the third chapter, John hesitated to baptize Jesus in the River Jordan, humbly claiming that “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matthew 3:14). 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 proof of Jesus messianic ministry so that he doesn’t feel as though he has wasted his time, his energy, basically his whole life.

How did Jesus respond to this challenge? Jesus responds to John’s disciples by providing them a litany of symptoms, which when combined can lead to only one accurate diagnosis about Jesus’ identity and the kingdom that has broken into the world. What are these signpost symptoms? The prophecies are coming true in Jesus, and best of all the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor receive good news. (11:5).

So let me ask you this morning: Do you want to catch the Advent Virus, but don’t know how? There’s at least one simple way to catch any virus: Expose yourself to the virus you want to catch.

For example, in years gone by, if a child in the family caught the chicken pox, parents often placed the healthy siblings in the same room with the infected child. Their hope was that if they played together, watched TV together, they, would catch the virus. That way, all the children in the house would have it at the same time.

This year, instead of catching a computer virus or a shopping virus, think about catching Advent Virus. Expose yourself to people who have it. Search out the opportunities to revisit the true meaning of Christmas, to flee manic mall madness and spending hours at the computer, to mingle with those for whom Jesus is a meaningful

presence in their lives. Seek out a community of the infected and fervent, who are using their time, talents and treasures to do amazing things for others. If you hang with them, you'll catch the Advent Virus every time!

When you partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, think of the ways that waiting for the Christ child can make the season more meaningful this year— especially dwelling on the ways we can avoid the mad dash to exhaustion, so that we can honestly feel God's presence in our lives.

Catch the Advent virus—and insist on spreading joy, love, thoughtfulness, and renewal everywhere you go.

***Please keep the following people in your thoughts and prayers ....***

**Prayer List:** *Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Charley, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Patricia, Allen, Wendy, Staci, Garo and Bobbi.*