

Date Preached	11-Dec-2022	Date Initiated	22-Nov-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Adv 3, Yr A

" Stir up your power, O Lord,  
and with your great might come among us "



Welcome to the Third Sunday of Advent, which is also known by several other names! One is *GAUDETE SUNDAY*—Rejoice Sunday, in English—taken from the first word of today's liturgy in the ancient medieval rite: rejoice!<sup>i</sup> This joy—this re-**joy**-ing—is the reason today's candle on the Advent wreath is pink and not the customary blue.

This day is also known as *STIR-UP SUNDAY*, a light-hearted tradition stemming from the opening words of today's collect: "Stir up your power, O Lord ... ." As with all folk customs, the history of *STIR-UP SUNDAY* is hazy and somewhat contradictory, but the general outline goes something like this: *STIR-UP SUNDAY* was the day to begin preparing your Christmas pudding—the traditional Christmas-Day dessert in England—if it was going to be ready to eat on December twenty-fifth; for after the pudding was mixed together and steamed, it needed time to cure, to enhance its flavor ... before, finally, at the Christmas table, being doused with brandy, set alight and devoured. Hearing "STIR UP," in church, then, was your cue to get busy in the kitchen.<sup>ii</sup>

But the denizens of dessert-land among you have probably already noticed a little flaw here: Once steamed (or, later, baked) a Christmas pudding takes *weeks* to cure. If you waited until *now*—the third Sunday of Advent—to make it, there would be many long faces at your Christmas dinner table. And you're right! In fact, in the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*,<sup>iii</sup> the *STIR UP* collect that signaled pudding-making day was always prayed on the last Sunday *before* Advent—at least a *month* before Christmas.<sup>iv</sup>

In fact—and, I promise, this sermon will now become a bit less pudding and a bit more main course (!)—in the ancient English rite,<sup>v</sup> over the five Sundays before Christmas, there were actually *four* different collects that each began with the petition "STIR UP, O Lord."<sup>vi</sup> And in this oft-repeated prayer for *STIRRING UP*, I detect a wonderful outline or sketch of the entire season of Advent:

- On the final Sunday before Advent: "STIR UP, ... O Lord, the *wills of your faithful people*" ↓ ... so that we may bring forth the "fruit of good works."
- On the first Sunday of Advent: "STIR UP, ... O Lord, *your power*" ↓ and come" ... so that we may be "rescued ... from the threatening dangers of our sins."
- On the second Sunday of Advent: "STIR UP, O Lord, *our hearts*" ↓ [ ... ] to prepare the way" of Jesus.
- And finally, on the last Sunday before Christmas, our collect for today: "[STIR]<sup>vii</sup> UP, O Lord, your power and *come*" ↓ ... to succor—deliver—us.<sup>viii</sup>

This may be a lot to grasp in one hearing, **but**: If we take these collects as a series or a unit—as, undoubtedly, they were, with their identical opening words—an essential theme of Advent becomes quite evident: the delicate interplay—the beautiful dance—between Jesus and us, His people ... as we await His coming and His coming again. These collects alternate between

prayers for *us* to *prepare*; and prayers for *Him* to *act*. ¶ Stir up our will to do good works ... that you may rescue us from our sins. ¶ Stir up our hearts, to prepare a way for you ... that you may come to deliver us. Now, we must be a little careful here, lest we imply any theological cause-and-effect: Jesus doesn't save us *because* we do good works; and He will come again into this world, *regardless* of whether we prepare a way for Him.

But the back-and-forth movement of these ancient prayers gently highlights that Advent is as much a season about us—*our* mindsets, *our* desires, *our* receptivity—as it is about Jesus. Our faith declares as *fact* that Jesus *did* come once, in a manger; and *will* come again, in glory. The *only* open question—the very thing we pray for, in fact—is whether we'll be ready to *receive* Him. He is fully prepared to welcome us as His disciples ... as His faithful people ... but are *we* prepared to accept *His* welcome?

- We circle back to the Manger each December to recall ... and celebrate ... and *revel* in, even ... the fact that God loves us so much that God deigned to come and live among us; loves us so much that God laid aside all God's glory and came in the humblest, most vulnerable possible form. God loves us so much that the One Who is older than time and Author of All ... arrived as the newest and lowliest creature on earth.
  - > Are we prepared to receive Him, anew, with the almost unbearable excitement and overflowing joy with which we receive a newborn baby—a child, a grandchild, a niece or nephew—into our lives? that same precious love that plays our heartstrings like a harp and reduces us to COOCHY-COO and goofy faces and sing-song-y voices?
  - > For the *first* prayer of Advent is for God to STIR UP in us this *same* joy, wonder and thanksgiving for Christ the *Child*.
- *And* ... that Baby we burble over in the Manger grows up and lives and dies and lives again in order to free us from the cost of our sins ... because that Baby's mission is our eternal liberty.
  - > Are we also prepared to welcome Him when He comes again, this time in a form not innocent but glorious ... not powerless but regnant? This preparation is somewhat harder, I think, for it centers less in our emotions and more in our morals: It is bound up in how we live our lives, set our priorities and make our decisions.
  - > When He returns, will He find us stewarding the liberty He's given us, for the good of all? Will he find us eager to share word (and deed) of Him with friend and stranger? Will He find us making sacrifices in our own lives, so that others may live more abundantly?
  - > For the *second* prayer of Advent is for God to STIR UP in us a faithful, meaningful, disciplined response to Christ the *Man*.

So, as we prepare to mix the next batch Christmas cookie dough ... or add the spices to the cider simmering on the stove ... or whip up a batch of Uncle Iggy's legendary eggnog: Whatever spoon we take up, may God STIR UP in **us hearts** that are fully prepared to meet Christ ... in His *every* coming.



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<sup>i</sup> In the medieval custom of the Church, there was an introit—a passage from Scripture sung (or said) as the clergy and choir were, literally, **GOING INTO** [INTROIT is a Latin verb that means "he/she/it goes in(to)"] the chancel and sanctuary—appointed for every Sunday. During the other three Sundays of Advent, the introits began, "Unto You, O Lord, will I lift up my soul"; "Behold, the Lord shall come to save the nations"; and "Remember me, O Lord, according to (Your) favor." (These are my (slight) adaptations of the introits for Advent 1, 2 and 4 found in an 1868 English translation of the Sarum Missal (<https://archive.org/details/sarumm00cath/mode/2up>.) But the introit appointed for *this* Sunday, taken from St Paul's letter to the Philippians (4:4), begins, "*Rejoice* in the Lord always; and again, I say, *Rejoice!*" (The Latin text of this verse begins with GAUDETE, which means REJOICE; hence, this day came to be (and still is, in some circles) known as GAUDETE Sunday.) It started this day's liturgy on an entirely different note—especially in an age when the Lord was more to be feared for hating our sins than praised for having forgiven them—and people noticed!

<sup>ii</sup> There are several other wonderful 'sub-traditions' that run alongside this one. One is that the pudding was to be made with exactly thirteen ingredients, to represent Jesus and the twelve Apostles. Another is that every member of the household should take a turn stirring the batter ... and should stir from east to west, to recall the journey of the Magi. Indeed, the relatively heavy spicing of this cake is said to recall the aromatic gifts the Magi brought to Jesus (and/or the heavily spiced cuisine of their homeland).

<sup>iii</sup> *I.e.*, the 1662 edition—the only officially authorized (*i.e.*, approved by Parliament) version of the Prayer Book in England.

<sup>iv</sup> I could, but won't, go on and on here. Suffice it to say that Christ the King Sunday, which *we now* always observe on the last Sunday before Advent did not become a liturgical custom until the twentieth century. (In fact, Christ the King still isn't an official part of our *Book of Common Prayer*.)

<sup>v</sup> The one we refer to as "Sarum"—the liturgical customs followed at Salisbury Cathedral, in southern England.

<sup>vi</sup> STIR UP is a translation of the Latin imperative EXCITA (whence, our EXCITE). In the Sarum Rite, the third Sunday of Advent—ironically, given *our own* Prayer Book!—did not have a STIR UP collect.

<sup>vii</sup> Or RAISE.

<sup>viii</sup> Over the centuries, much has been added to and deleted from this particular collect (see Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (1981), pp 166-67), but our current version is still quite similar to the Sarum original.