

**Kringling**  
**Matthew 11:2-11**

A virus is in the air. If you've been exposed, count yourself blessed. I'm talking about the Advent Virus, and it's one we all want to catch. This warning was sent to me, and I thought I should share it with you.

“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. 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 symptoms of THE ADVENT VIRUS include:

- An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.
- A loss of interest in judging other people.
- Overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
- Frequent attacks of smiling.

“Please send this warning out to all your friends. This virus can and has affected many systems. Some systems have been completely cleaned out because of it.”

Have you come down with the virus yet? If you're exhibiting any of these symptoms, you probably have. What's more, if you're showing these signs of the virus, you're probably infecting others already. In fact, you may be consciously and even gleefully spreading it. Then again, that is what we're supposed to be doing right now. It is the Church's job to infect the world with contagious joy. 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. But beware: There are a lot of bugs floating around out there that will try to mimic the "Advent Virus." So, how can we be sure we are infected with the real

thing? How can we be sure we aren't just suffering from a condition that only imitates some of the classic symptoms of the "Advent Virus"? Our Gospel Lesson this morning helps us here.

This morning's lesson from the Gospel according to Matthew 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) He is asking, "What are the symptoms your presence elicits?" It's worth noting that earlier in Matthew's gospel, at the start of Jesus' public ministry, John was convinced of Jesus' genuine nature. John had hesitated to baptize Jesus, protesting that "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But time and the cold reality of Herod's prison had apparently cooled John's Advent fever. Now, as he is nearing the end of his life, he wants to see evidence and hear proofs of Jesus' messianic ministry.

How does Jesus respond to this challenge? Jesus responds by providing a litany of symptoms: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor receive good news (11:5). In other words, Jesus is saying to John, hope, and peace, and joy, and love are spreading; everything you declared is coming; take heart and rejoice, even now in the face of all that would deny you joy.

There is a hope so sure that it will not be quenched, a peace so strong that it will not be quelled, a joy so full that it will not be overcome, a love so true that it cannot ever be denied. It is the love of Christ, and when we accept it, his peace and joy fill us, capture us, and send us into the world in the indomitable hope of spreading his good news. That is what the genuine Advent Virus is, and what catching it does.

So, do you want to catch the Advent Virus, or maybe get exposed to a new dose of it? Let me suggest a sure-fire way of doing that. It's the simplest way to catch any virus: get exposed to it. We need such exposure, because many conflicting emotions, thoughts, and messages

are competing for our minds and hearts right now, causing us stress or indifference. The fact is Advent can be a really difficult time for many people. For those who are alone, this can be the loneliest time of year. For those who have lost a loved one, this is the time of year that that loss can be most felt. For those of limited means, this season's emphasis on material giving can just serve to underscore their poverty. If we do not consciously and deliberately seek out the Advent virus, we might just miss it altogether. We need its infectious joy, and its incurable hope if we are to journey through Advent, and truly arrive at Christmas with any sense of peace, and our desire to love stabilized.

So, here's how to get infected; get exposed to people who have it! Mingle with the already infected; those for whom Christ is a real, meaningful, presence in their lives. Seek out the community of the infected and inflamed and the fervent and feverish. I think that's a great description of what the gathered Church is at its best. Come and worship. You'll catch the Advent Virus every time!

Now once you've caught it, here's what to do: start spreading it. There are lots of great ways to do this, but, this morning, I want to suggest a spiritual discipline that's completely different: in the next weeks, and hopefully well beyond, start Kringling people. To Kringle someone, as in Kris Kingle, you do a kindness or a favor for someone without them ever knowing that it was you that did it, and without any expectation of a return favor. Kringling can start a whole bunch of Advent virus infections.

This is how it happened in just one place. Back when our youngest daughter, Caitlin, was barista at Starbucks, one person's Kringling exploded into an epidemic of good will. It was late on a dark Advent evening, and the work-day had been a long one. Everyone just wanted to get through the last couple of hours and get home. A customer pulled through the packed drive-through and asked Caitlin just how

many customers behind her in the line had their orders still in the register que to be paid. Finding out, the customer said, "I'll pay for all of them." When the next customer in the line came to the pay window Caitlin leaned out and said, "Merry Christmas, your order has already been paid for by another customer." This customer was so joyously startled at this news, a broad smile broke out across his formerly sullen face. The next customer in line was so moved that she paid for yet another group of customers newly arrived in the register que. And so it went, for over an hour till closing, as every customer found their order paid by yet another previous customer. That generosity was infectious, not only among the customers, but among the employees and their manager who all found their spirits suddenly lifted. Joy was breaking out among them as their imaginations were caught in the wonder of what was happening. But, that night wasn't the end of it. The very next morning the same phenomenon started all over again. It carried on throughout the rest of Advent and Christmas. And it even happened again and again at random moments for months after that. All that from just one person's Kringle.

So, this Advent, take up the spiritual discipline of Kringling. Go Kringle somebody! Secretly bless someone. Your blessing doesn't have to cost money, either. Be creative; the possibilities of who you could infect are nearly endless. Catch the Advent Virus, then spread infectious hope, peace, joy, and love.