

Organized religion has many detractors. Today you can hear some people say they have real interest in faith, but not in religion. They want a spiritual life, but they find organized religions unsatisfactory. Swipes against religion are frequent enough in the entertainment industry, but families have to deal with them too. High schoolers, college students and young adults separate themselves from family in order to establish their independence, and often one of the first casualties is the family's practice of religion.

On the one hand, you hate for anyone to reject what you believe in so strongly, a system of life that speaks to the core of your being. On the other hand, if enough people share the opinion that religions don't meet their needs, -- let's admit it -- there may be some reason for that. If religions give more attention to ritual, structures, and laws than they give to meaning and compassion, people will smell the hypocrisy.

Even before the time of Jesus, organized religion was criticized for repeating rituals and abandoning meaning. Take Psalm 40, for example. It says flat out that God does not desire sacrifice and offering. Instead, the psalmist sings, "I have come to do your will," and that pleases God. Priests in the temple went through a lot of trouble to offer those sacrifices according to the very way the bible said they should be done, only to open the book of psalms and find out that God isn't interested in these sacrifices anyway. The psalmist, like someone who rejected religion, but had faith, sings a song of revolution, "Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will." It's a passage that makes folks in organized religions squirm.

What makes it worse, though, is that the Letter to the Hebrews quotes this very passage from Psalm 40 as if Jesus himself sang the words. The Letter contrasts the offerings that were made according to the bible's law with the coming of Christ, who said, "I come to do your will." Hebrews says Christ takes away the first kind of offerings and establishes the second. That is, he takes away the offerings in the temple in order to establish the offering of himself. It's like having Jesus say, "You don't need organized religion, as long as you do the will of God."

The reason we hear this passage on the Fourth Sunday of Advent is because it explains why Jesus came to Bethlehem. He came not to slip into the empty religious ritual of his time, but to do God's will. When he taught his disciples to pray, he said, "Use the words, 'Your will be done.'" When he knelt in the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, "Your will be done." At first, doing God's will sounds like it makes you free. It does, but it also brings you to the cross.

Organized religion has rituals that are meant to help people with their faith. Sometimes we fail. Families have rituals at meals and holidays that are meant to bring people together. Sometimes they fail. Christmas will celebrate our belief in the birth of Jesus, a leader whose followers embraced forms of worship and a way of life. Anytime we do rituals at home or at church, we risk making them empty. They will have meaning if we put into them our desire to do God's will.