

“The Gift of Advent”
First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest
Isaiah 64: 1-9
1st Corinthians 1: 3-9

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Lake Forest, IL
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First Sunday of Advent

This is the first Sunday of Advent.

Advent began as a six-week season of preparation for baptism at Christmas, paralleling the Season of Lent. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Advent is still six weeks. However, because Christmas was seen as a lesser festival than Easter, Advent was shortened in the Western church to four weeks in the 6th Century. Yet it is still a “little lent” in which we reflect and prepare.

While in recent times this has meant preparing for the Christmas festival, it should be a time of spiritual preparation as well, for the indwelling of Christ in our lives in a new way.

Contrary to popular belief, the idea of attaching specific meaning to the weeks of Advent (and thus to the candles in the Advent wreath) is a fairly modern notion. Further, there are a variety of traditions for naming the weeks and the candles:

Hope, peace, joy, and love;
Prophets, shepherds, angels, and the magi;
Expectation, proclamation, joy, and purity.

However, from the beginning the symbolism of the Advent candles lies first and foremost in the circle of light that they create together. A weekly emphasis that grows from the scripture readings is far more powerful than trying to make the candles “fit” any particular scheme.

The color of the vestments used for the Sundays in Advent is usually blue – to symbolize hope, or purple – to symbolize repentance.

The Season of Advent which begins today is a season of waiting, longing, promise, and a time of spiritual preparation.

Yet, the Paradox of Advent is although it is the Season of waiting, expectation, and preparation, what we are anticipating has already come to pass – God is with us.

Paul reminds the church in Corinth:

“There is no end to what has happened in you, it is beyond speech, beyond knowledge. And the evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives. Just think – you don’t need a thing, you’ve got it all! All of God’s gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for Jesus to arrive on the scene....”

The message, the gift of Advent is here among us, but once again we must prepare ourselves for the indwelling of Christ in our lives in a new way. It is hard to hear the message of Advent and receive its true gift.

The world in which we live is shouting at the top of its lungs that we only have 27 more shopping days to buy the gifts that will somehow make our Christmas complete.

Our society wants us to believe that we can buy or find happiness in the outer world of material things. And Christmas is the holiday that screams at us that we must seek to find that perfect gift for a loved one to indicate how much we truly love them.

Paradoxically, what keeps our consumer society going is the fact that trying to find yourself through things doesn’t work. The ego’s satisfaction is short-lived and so we keep looking for more, keep buying, keep consuming.

And Paul is saying to us through our scripture lesson today.

“Just think – you don’t need a thing, you’ve got it all. All God’s gifts are right in front of you.”

I never particularly liked Christmas when I was a child. It seemed like I was always disappointed. I never seemed to get what I wanted. Now, many times I wasn’t sure what that was, but I knew it wasn’t clothes and for sure not socks or t-shirts. My mother was famous for getting my sisters and I practical gifts and passing them off as Christmas gifts. The best example of that was the year I got a package of underwear. As if getting underwear wasn’t bad enough, they were not even “Jockey” brand briefs; and under closer examination they were stamped, “irregulars.”

Yet that was not the most disappointing Christmas. The most disappointing one was the year that I knew what I wanted. I wanted a new baseball glove and I had told my Dad the exact name and model of the glove I wanted: it was a Rawling’s Marty Marion autographed model. I wanted that glove so badly because it was the most popular; It was the “the glove of choice” on my little league team. Instead I got a Sear’s, J.C Higgins “special.”

Of course in both these examples, I missed the whole point of Christmas. Even though as the minister’s son, I knew the point of Christmas, it was after all Jesus’ birthday, but as a kid I never really got it.

When we wake up and get it, we realize that we already have all that we will ever need. “Just think – you don’t need a thing, you’ve got it all. All God’s gifts are right in front of you.” “O come O come Emmanuel” Emmanuel is here, God is with us. “Rejoice, Rejoice...”

Advent is a time for us to stop all our hurrying and worrying, it is a time to be still, to wake up, to listen, and to recognize... the indwelling of Christ in our lives in a new way.

“Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes.

Every moment and every age, every day and every night he comes, comes, ever comes.

Many a song have I sung in many a mood of mind, but all their notes have always proclaimed, "He comes, comes, ever comes."

In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he comes, comes, ever comes.

In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds he comes, comes, ever comes.

In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart,

and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine.

He comes, comes, ever comes.”

--from Gitanjali by Rabindranath Tagore

Perhaps Advent seems outmoded, even ancient and irrelevant for the 21st century. Yet, what is not outmoded, ancient, or irrelevant is that God comes, comes, ever comes. When we take the time to wait, to be still, we become aware of that presence. Stress, tension, conflict, inner disparities find a centering point in that presence, and life becomes fuller and deeper.

Here are a few ideas to help you develop your own path of Advent waiting.

1. Take an evening and make an Advent wreath. Do just that by joining us at church tonight at 5 pm to make an Advent wreath. And then each day take a few moments to quiet yourself, light a candle, and ask for eyes to see and ears to hear the coming of God into your life.
2. Listen to some Advent hymns in the quiet of the morning or before you enter the night's slumber. Notice that the tones and rhythm of the music for this season are soothing and centering, inviting you inward to a deep and sacred place within yourself. As you listen to the Advent music, be aware of being aware.

“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.”

“Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates;
Behold, the King of glory waits;
The King of kings is drawing near;
The Savior of the world is here!”

3. Give yourself permission to prepare yourself for God's coming in your life by engaging in quiet meditation at the end of each day. Scan your day and note the times that you were aware of God's grace, aware that you were loved, aware that grace was occurring. Re-imagine those moments and thank God for showering you with these gifts.
4. Refuse to be driven by the culture. Let yourself be still and quiet, rather than frenzied and frenetic. Out of your stillness consider how you might bring God into the lives of others.

It has been said: “Stillness is the language God speaks, and everything else is a bad translation.” Stillness is really another word for space. Becoming conscious of stillness whenever we encounter it in our lives will connect us with the formless and timeless dimension within ourselves, that which is beyond thought, beyond ego.

It may be the stillness that pervades the world of nature; it may be the stillness in your room in the early hours of the morning, or the stillness in the gaps between sounds.

Stillness has no form – that is why through thinking we cannot become aware of it. Thought is form. Being aware of stillness means to be still. To be still is to be conscious without thought. You are never more essentially, more deeply, yourself than when you are still.

“Be still, and know that I am God.
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth!
The Lord of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge.” Psalm 46: 10-11

“Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul.” “Be Still My Soul”

The Gift of Advent:

“Just think – you don’t need a thing, you’ve got it all. All God’s gifts are right in front of you.”

1st Corinthians 1:3-9
The Message

May all the gifts and benefits that come from God our Father, and the Master, Jesus Christ, be yours.

Every time I think of you – and I think of you often! I thank God for your lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus. There's no end to what has happened in you – it's beyond speech, beyond knowledge. The evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives.

Just think – you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.