

Sermon for the first Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2021, St. John's, Oneida.

We have entered the season of Advent, observed on the four Sundays preceding Christmas. Did you know that the Advent Wreath was “invented” by a German protestant pastor named Johann Hinrich Wickam in the mid-nineteenth century? His wreath had candles representing every day of Advent, with larger candles for each Sunday. The Advent wreath as we know it made it over to our shores in the 1930's. My first experience with an Advent Wreath came when I was in college, and I was visiting the house of a (then) girlfriend during the Advent season. I was presented with the honor of lighting one of the candles. In my ignorance I didn't know which one it was, but I was willing to take on the task! It was the kind of wreath where the small heat generated from the candles caused the wreath itself to rotate in a circle, symbolizing the eternal nature of God and God's love. I was given a match, which, though I had never had the need to strike one, I took, struck, and promptly held it upside down so that the flame could lick at my fingers. With a short cry of pain I dropped the match, which did not make it over to the candle on the wreath. It was a serious mood killer. Did I already mention that the relationship didn't last?

Also, other Christian traditions emphasize different things during Advent. In one Catholic tradition, the four sermons on the four Sundays of Advent were devoted to the subjects of Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell, respectively. These subjects are referred to as the “Four last things of the soul” in human life and the afterlife. For the most part, these are not the primary topics of discussion in the sermons that will be presented to you in our church.

We are an Episcopal Church in the Anglican communion. Our traditions in Advent stretch back to England. Our four Sundays of Advent celebrate hope, peace, love, and joy. There are other descriptive words associated with each Sunday, but this is the gist of it. This candle, this Sunday, symbolizes hope. Along with hope comes anticipation. We anticipate the coming of Christ into the world, we expect He will return in glory, and therefore there is hope for all of God's people. Our readings from scripture today reflect both hope and expectation.

There are other themes that permeate Advent that run throughout the season. One is light. We will eventually light the “Christ Candle”, which commemorates the birth of Christ, bringing His “light” into the world. Another is humility. True humility. The kind of humility where we embrace who we are in Christ over who we are in the flesh. It is the kind of humility where we see ourselves, and each other, as God sees us. It is the kind of humility embodied by Jesus in the way He entered and departed this earthly life, and in the way He lived every single day.

The gospels, including Luke's gospel, a portion of which was so beautifully presented by the character of Linus in “A Charlie Brown Christmas”, were written before there was a Christian Church. It was a “Jesus Movement”, which claimed that the Messiah that both the Jewish people and the world were looking for was indeed Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was the “righteous Branch” sprung up for David foretold by the prophet Jeremiah in our Old Testament reading. Jesus would return with power and glory, echoing the prophecy in the Old Testament Book of Daniel. Jesus, however, is a Messiah that people could relate to on a personal level. He is a Messiah that entered this world as most of the people in Luke's time entered the world; in humble circumstances. He lived as most of the people lived. He died a martyr, but not before promising to return. He invited people to be in relationship through Him with God the Father. He gave them Hope. One of their own gave them Hope. Not someone in a castle. Not some distant

“other”. That Hope has since spread throughout the world. It is Hope for which we light the candle today.

Next is light. Jesus is the “light of the world”. Soon we will light a candle to emphasize that point. Consider this, however; in the ancient world when it was dark it was completely, utterly dark until the sun came up again. The only artificial light was via campfires or torches. Former Episcopal priest and prolific author Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that it is no coincidence that Jonah spent three days in the utter darkness of the whale’s belly, or that Jesus spent three days in the tomb, or that Paul was blinded for three days in Damascus. Three days is the amount of time between the disappearance of the waning moon and the reappearance of the waxing moon. Back then it was a big deal! It was easy to associate evil with darkness, or the absence of light. Remember that darkness was not abolished in the first creation story. It was only separated from the light. Both are “good”. It is fair to claim that Jesus is the light of the world, but perhaps the best way to think of this light is not as a bulb, but as a presence that exists outside of what we call light or darkness. It is in the fabric of creation. It is Grace with no tint or hue. Jesus is present in both the physical light and dark of creation, and also in the “light and dark” times of our lives. It is in those “dark” or tough times that we can encounter God in unexpected ways. As the body of Christ in this world, I pray that we are present for others in much the same way.

Finally, Jesus presented a humility to the world that was absolutely radical. First of all, the Word of God came to John in the desert. In what we would say is the “middle of nowhere”. It bypassed the cities. It spoke directly to the common man. In a world dominated by the power of Rome and in a society where a very few were wealthy, Jesus was born in a barn to a confused young mother who had no standing in the world other than that lent to her by the men in her family, and her husband was trying to figure out how to handle the situation honorably. On top of that, Herod wanted to kill him. Then Jesus spent his earthly lifetime challenging authority and engaging directly with all the “common” people. He saw others as God saw them. Can we do the same!?

Friends, we are members of the Body of Christ in this world. We have lit the candle of Hope. I only challenge us, in our lives and ministries (perhaps I should say the ministry of our lives) to extend Hope to others. The woes of the human condition alluded to in our gospel have been and will be with us. It is our Hope, that in the end, in whatever form it takes, that God’s love will win. I also challenge us, in both the light of day and the dark of night, and especially in the tougher times of our lives, to embody that loving presence of God which we call “Light”. It will indeed make someone’s life better. And finally, with at least a portion of the humility of Jesus, I pray that we continue to see the face of God in everyone we meet. Perhaps they will come to share in our Hope. Perhaps they will recognize the face of God in us. Amen.