

## **Looking Forward in Hope**

First Congregational Church - Oshkosh, WI  
November 29, 2015

*“I am waiting for the light to shine, I am waiting for the light to shine. I have lived in the darkness for so long, I am waiting for the light to shine!”* (Roger Miller, *Big River*)

When I was a kid (once upon a time, very long ago!) the Christmas shopping season started the day after Thanksgiving. As the years progressed I noted that decorations in stores started going up right after Halloween. This year Fanny and I saw artificial trees on store shelves in September! What next? Perhaps Santa Claus will eventually go head-to-head with Uncle Sam and show up in the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parades.

For people of faith, however, the season is defined not by the marketing needs of the nation’s retailers, but by the grace of God. So, throughout its history, the Church has prepared to meet the Christ child not with extended

shopping seasons geared to save the economy, but with a season of prayer, reflection, and repentance.

The word “Advent” comes from a Latin noun that meant “coming” or “arrival.” Obviously, it refers to the arrival of the Christ – the longed for Savior of all – both his first arrival in Bethlehem, and his second coming at which he will bring creation to consummation. Advent, as the first season of the Church’s calendar year, is not merely a time to look back in history; it’s also a period for glancing forward to the ways in which we shall meet Christ anew. Advent traditions in the Church are intended to prepare us to receive Christ when and where we meet him in our lives. Hence, Advent is that season when we look forward in hope that when Christ comes we shall be ready, we will recognize him, we will celebrate the Word made flesh among us!

While red and green are the secular colors for Christmas, the traditional liturgical color for Advent has been purple, which is the color of penitence in which we

acknowledge our own inadequacy and our utter dependence on God. Hence, Advent became a season of fasting back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It was a somber time on the church calendar in which hope was nurtured and expectation was encouraged. Purple is also the color of royalty for during Advent the church looks forward to meeting the Prince of Peace!

While shopping malls lure us with sale signs and newspaper ads, in the church we light special candles during Advent. This tradition most likely started in Germany just prior to the Reformation but has grown over the centuries to where it is now widely practiced, even in such orthodox churches as those of the Roman Rite and Eastern Church. Each of the four Sundays of Advent, a candle is lighted to signify that the light of the world is drawing near. We recall Isaiah's promise that "those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light." The Advent candles stand for the important themes of the season: hope, peace, joy, and love. Today, the first Sunday in Advent, the theme of Hope is uplifted as we

look forward to the realization of the realm of God on earth as it is in heaven.

During the coming weeks many of us will participate in wonderful gatherings of friends and families. Wonderful as these might be, this season is far more than an excuse to imitate those who in ancient days celebrated the coming of the Winter Solstice. Advent is our time to prepare our hearts and minds to receive Christ.

John the Baptist came to prepare the people of his time for the coming of the Christ – not in a manger but as a servant of the Lord. He called for a change as radical and potentially challenging as those being considered at the world summit on climate and global warming in Paris, France the next two weeks, or as seemingly impossible to address as the fact that we in this nation spend \$450 Billion on Christmas while not being able to change patterns of behavior so that all persons might have health insurance and every child in the land have hope this Christmas.

John's call was basically a cry for repentance – a fundamental change of heart, soul, mind, and behavior. For John, true repentance “bears fruit” in lives patterned after the Christ himself who, in the song of the prophet Zephaniah is a ministry of restoration: saving the lame, gathering the outcasts, and transforming shame into praise and in the prophecies of Jeremiah is a ministry of justice in Judah and Jerusalem. John warned that the stakes were very high – as high as those threatening our world presently in the concern for global warming and climate change, terrorism and global war. “Every tree that does not bear fruit,” John insists, “will be cut down and thrown into the fire!”

When the Church entertains such texts as these during Advent, the purpose is the same today as it was for those in faith communities down through the ages: “What then shall we do?” Where's the hope in this? Woe is us. We find ourselves in the midst of a season of crowded shopping malls, rising credit card debt, to-do lists that are

seemingly endless, dysfunctional relatives, and pants that used to fit! How can we change? What hope is there for us? How can we start repenting – turning around – when the movement toward over-indulgence and self-gratification is so massive at this time of year – all in the name of Jesus – when it just doesn't seem possible?

John's answer was simple: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Seems simple. We all know it isn't. Prophetic preaching always cuts like an ax to the bone. Jesus' message isn't much of a picnic either. Remember his word to the rich young ruler? "Sell all you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Where's the hope in this?

Elizabeth Boulton, Minister for Discipleship at Old South Church, UCC, in Boston, MA writes that after six solid hours of labor with her first child she grabbed her

husband by his shirt and screamed, “I can’t do this anymore.” Then she grabbed her midwife and said “It’s too hard, I can’t do it.” Her midwife looked at her and spoke in a voice as ancient of the Biblical midwife Shiphrah, saying, “Liz, you are doing it. Right now. This is what you were created to do – and, you’re doing it.”

So, Elizabeth writes, we breathed and I pushed and after some of the most difficult hours of my life, a slippery little baby came into the world.

For us as Christians in today’s world we have to push so hard for anything to really change. We tire of it. We want to simply give up and walk away from the challenges. We hear John the Baptist’s words and we want to grab him by his camel hair coat and yell, “It’s too hard. We can’t do that.”

But, think of this: before John slipped Jesus into the River Jordan, before the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a Dove, John was proclaiming good

news in his message to the people. He was saying to them that they wouldn't have to do what he was asking of them alone. One is coming who is more powerful than I, and that One will be a midwife to all the nations. When we find ourselves saying this is too hard, we can't do it, the One Who is coming will look into our hearts and proclaim, "You are doing it. Right now. This is what you were created to do – and you're doing it. Keep pushing!"

The new baby is on its way. All creation is groaning as if in labor. God's new world is slipping into being even now, and with the Spirit's help, we can play our part, throwing the doors of our hearts wide open to hope that is building within us that God's Word may become flesh once more and dwell among us.

This is the fruit of repentance, and the sweet promise of Advent. This time we choose to look forward in hope, doing the things we have learned and received and heard, knowing that the God of grace and peace will be with us! Amen.



