

Advent 1 – Hope

Well welcome to the First Sunday of Advent. Advent 1 signals that it is only 27 days until Christmas! Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is all of the shopping and baking and decorating we need to get to! I hope, at least for today, we can set those thoughts aside. I

wonder if celebrating Advent and Christmas in the midst of a global pandemic will help us to move through this season in a different way, with different priorities. Is there an opportunity staring us in the face, to make this Advent and this Christmas even more meaningful? How might we be able to do that? What might that look like?

Before we talk about what **we do know** about Advent, let's acknowledge **what we do not know** about this season of the church year.

~ One thing we do not know is the history of Advent. There are many versions of this story. Where is the truth?

~ We also do not know what colour the candles should be. There are many points of view on this topic. We use purple which symbolizes royalty, but also penance. We use one pink candle, which stands for rejoicing. We do not know why **it** is the third candle to be lit.

~ Finally, we do not know the order of the candles. We are going with Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, but it is not difficult to find many different orderings.

Let's share some things that **we do know** about Advent.

~ Advent comes from the Latin word Adventus – it means coming – the arrival of a notable person, thing or event.

~ Advent is the first season of the Christian year, 4 Sundays that lead us to Christmas.

~ Almost always, the Advent candles are positioned within an Advent wreath. The circular form of that wreath symbolizes God's creation of the world, no beginning, no end, eternal. As we light the candles, we think of the light of Christ coming into the world.

~ As Lent leads us to the cross, Advent leads us to the manger. Advent is an opportunity to reflect and to consider. I hope you do that.

And speaking of hope, today we focus on the candle of Hope. The amazing South African, Desmond Tutu, said that 'hope is being able to see that there is light ... despite all of the darkness.'

Imagine for a moment, someone asks you to define 'Hope', what would you say?

Advent starts in November ... a month which some say is the most dismal month of our year. December 21, 3 days before Christmas is the shortest day of the year ... from then on, it starts getting brighter, days get longer, things start to look up!

This year, we are getting through this dreary month in the midst of a global pandemic, in the midst of racial tension, at a time when bias and prejudice is rearing its ugly head all over the place ... racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and prejudice toward those with physical or mental disabilities. We all know people who are struggling with

physical and/or mental illness. Poverty and homelessness, domestic violence and so many other struggles are the daily experience of God's people ... all exacerbated by the precautions and restrictions brought on by the pandemic. We all need a little hope these days.

Someone named Dion, who I believe works for the Salvation Army in Toronto, writes about the New Hope Leslieville shelter for the homeless. He says that the staff of New Hope hold out so much hope for each person who comes through their doors. They hope that these people can soon find a home, a job, get reconnected with their family, get some help addressing their mental health and their addictions.

Hope for our brothers and sisters on the street that one day they might find health and healing and joy.

I believe that in God, we have limitless, endless, abounding hope. As children of God, we all have access, not only to the love of God but to the hope that is in God. But here is the problem.

Imagine a child who does not feel loved. They have grown up in a wonderful home with amazing parents. They have been given everything they ever wanted and more. But the child still does not feel loved.

From our perspective, that is absolutely ridiculous. The parents could not be more loving, more generous, more accepting, more devoted to their child. The parents can't believe that their child does not feel loved. They have every reason to feel loved.

I think it can be that way with hope. We might, in theory, have every reason to be hopeful, but somehow, for some reason, we are blinded by the light and from where we sit, all hope is gone, there is no reason for hope, there is no candle glowing in the dark, only defeat, misery, and pain.

It is like the story of the fish that I had never heard until two years ago and since then have heard it often. Two young fish are playing about in the ocean. An older fish swims by, says hello and then says, how's the

water today boys? The two young fish look at each other ... what water?

It is there all the time ... all around us ... and sometimes we just don't know it ... water, love, hope.

God leaves us neither loveless nor hopeless, but sometimes, for all sorts of reasons, that is exactly how we feel. It is not reality, but it can become our reality.

We are not there yet, but the candles of peace and love and joy that we will light are important here. Hope, joy, peace, and love are connected. If we look at much of the apostle Paul's writing, these 4 gifts from God often travel in a flock ... hope, peace, joy and love ... almost always together. I think that when we imagine that hope is gone, if we can find a bit of joy, or peace, or love, it might be the necessary ember of the fire we need to fan the flame of the candle of hope. If you reflect on your life, it is almost always never a straight, smooth path. There are always some highs and lows, ups and downs, hills and valleys. It is

important to note that it was certainly not a straight, smooth path for the one for whom we light these candles.

The Rev. Laurel Dykstra reminds us that the prophets of the old Testament predicted that the Messiah would come to us ... that He would be born, suffer, die, and rise again. But in and through all of that, we would know Him as the Prince of Peace, the Everlasting Father, Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God. She goes on to say that Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus were all rooted in the wilderness tradition.

Both Matthew and Luke begin with the birth of Jesus, but in Mark, it seems Jesus has an engagement with an untamed God. He is wet with river water. The Spirit in the form of a bird, leads Him out into the wilderness only to be tested and tormented by the worst of company.

Sometimes, our lives can feel like the wilderness. Have you ever experienced any of these – Temptation. Fear. Loneliness. Friendless. Unloved. Drowning. Excluded. Hopeless.

For those who are so loved and do not realize it.

For those who have so much to live for, yet feel so hopeless.

For those whose lives seem completely empty of joy and peace ...

May we take some time this Advent ... to stop racing about, shopping, baking, decorating ... that we might light a candle and allow God to be present with us and pray that God might make His presence known to all of them.

Listen to these words were written by Joan Chittister –

Advent calls us to hope in the promise that God is calling us to greater things and will be with us as we live them. Hope is the recall of good in the past, on which we base our expectation of good in the future, however bad the present. It digs in the rubble of the heart for memory of God's promise to bring good out of evil and joy out of sadness ... and on the basis of those memories of the past, takes new hope for the future. Even in the face of death. Even in the fear of loss. Even when our own private little worlds go to dust, as sooner or later, they always do.

God's peace, love, joy, and hope to you ... this day, and all the days of your life.

Amen