

First Sunday in Advent  
December 1, 2019  
Christ Church, Gabriola Island

We have before us today, what could be a complex situation: it seems we are asked to address both first and last things at the same time. What holds them together, I believe, is the theme of this first Sunday in Advent: HOPE.

We are preparing to remember and celebrate the gift of Jesus, the Christ Child born in Bethlehem, the one we also call **Emmanuel** meaning God-with-Us. This is the beginning of our Christian story, this is what dramatists would call “the inciting incident,” the birth of Jesus, son of Mary.

And

We are also being reminded to be alert for Jesus the Christ, to come again in what will be, according to Mathew’s gospel, at “an unexpected hour.” And that appearance is also found in Luke and Mark as being unpredictable but coming at some unknown future time.

So, where does that leave us today? Are we to choose which to focus on or **can** we explore the implications of both and sail through Advent with a sense of security and hopefulness based on what has been our faith in God’s redeeming love. **I HOPE SO.**

First, I would like to look at the theme or concept of Hope as it applies in our Christian/faith context and then secondly move on to see how we prepare for both the celebration of Christmas and what is often called “the Second Coming.” Finally, I want to retell a mystical experience I had of encountering Mary and the newborn Jesus as an example of how opening up to that avenue to this form of experience which many have found helpful in their own lives as they journey in Hope.

**HOPE** as many of you know is most often symbolized by an anchor, a ship’s anchor. In the catacombs in Rome where Christians worshipped in hiding in the days of persecution. There were many signs of anchors and some might see them like hidden cross but most view it as something that holds us steadfast and secure representing Hope in the Risen Christ as an anchor in their lives. And, and when the anchor is lifted out of the water we are off on a journey to new sights, new discoveries. This anchor does not hold us back! In letter to the Hebrews (6:19-20) the author of the epistle writes: *we have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine ...where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf has entered...*

This is not the *high in the sky, apple pie* kind of hope (a la Frank Sinatra's song) but that we hold onto with trust in God and God's love for us...and the Emmanuel nature of God-With-Us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's comments many years ago about not being optimistic about an end to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict demonstrates this for us. He was quoted in the Boston Globe:

*However, that does not mean I am without hope. I am a Christian. I am constrained by my faith to hope against hope, placing my trust in things yet unseen. (Boston Globe).*

We might ask ourselves, why start with hope, why not start with love or joy, or peace. I still believe that it is helpful to start with *hope first* and have that embedded in our hearts for it is another way of knowing that God, through Christ who came to be with us and we expect (as in the nature of hope) that Christ WILL come again. In this mystery, God is still with us, still, Emmanuel unseen by the naked eye but seen with the soft eyes of *the soul of love within*.

As the Advent Calendar begins the count down toward Christmas, I am cautioning myself to tack down the sea channel of sharing my time, talent and treasure with family and friends **and** also moving outward to those I do not know (well) or at all and incorporating them into my prayer time and exploring how my giving not just at this season but over the year can reflect the joy, love and peace that each Sunday in Advent will draw out. It is like getting a fresh start in the new year!

For example, does **peace** find me supporting Amnesty, Doctors without Borders, the United M & S Fund or Anglican Church's Primate World Relief Fund or does **joy** find me bringing a smile to a child or young person who has a need for sports equipment somewhere here on Gabriola or the Island and are these done out of **love**? Does it happen over the next 24 days or does it go on my calendar that reaches out in time over to the next advent season?? What comes off my list in order to make space for ??? Richard Rohr asks the question for the First Sunday in Advent:

*What expectations and demands of life can you let go of so that you can be more prepared for the coming of Jesus??*

I once saw a poster in the window of a travel agency, showing a cruise ship coming into port and a woman is looking at it saying: *Someday my ship will come in and I hope my hair will not be in curlers*. This is a static use of the word hope.

I have several primitive style prints from New England's Mystic Seaport showing a young woman with three children boating (in Victorian-styled pinafores) with the

script around the painting: *Don't wait for your ship to come in...row out and meet it!*

One woman believes the while she wants her “ship to come in” but she fears she won't be ready and in the second picture the young women is going 'bout things, like rowing towards the ship, that's indicating she taking some responsibility/action to at least welcome the ship coming in.

Sometimes being ready is just being open, welcoming and hopeful. It is living in trust or as Marcus Borg writes: leaving it in God's hands.

Borg in his book titled ***Convictions: How I learned what matters Most***, reclaimed for himself and others the importance of what our mystical experiences can tell us or remind us at least! They are yet another way of knowing of having our Hopes revealed...unplanned but very real.

Every Advent I actively revisit a mystical experience that has impacted me and my life that occurred while I was on retreat in July of 1998.

I was at the end of the first week of a thirty day Ignatius Retreat, at Eastern Point, Mass., the Rev. David Donovan SJ, assigned the Luke version (2:1-20) of the birth of Jesus. In addition, he told me to set my alarm at midnight and to make my way to one of the retreat rooms (pillows on flour, votive light shining, wind rustling the French doors). I came into the semi-dark room, sat down, opened the Bible and re-read the passage, which by now I knew by heart. Then, unexpectedly I knew I was not alone. And without turning I knew there was a young woman next to me...dark hair with a long shawl over her dark hair and she was holding a baby...Before I turned to her I knew who she was and that she was holding her newborn son. She asked me, but I heard no voice. "Do you want to hold my baby?". My thought was..."she's trusting me to hold her new, just born baby"...I said, "Yes, I would". She smiled and gave him to me to hold. I was in awe and so humbled...then I knew this baby was for not only me but for all to **protect and proclaim!** Those words rang out loud and clear within me. Then I knew it was time to return him to his mother and I turned and she smiled again and gently took him in her arms. I was alone in the room and I heard again the French doors rattling and saw the votive candle shimmer. I sat there for a while just being in that moment again and the wonderment. I made my way back to my "cell" and wrote down what happened...but I have never forgotten it...as if it were yesterday.

**Proclaim and protect:** what does that mean—how do I do it? That question comes to me consciously every advent...and it is still having slightly different yet

Hoped filled answers.

I know what I experienced and that is not deniable and cannot be taken away. It continues to give me hope that this Emmanuel has not gone away but is there for all of us and that one day in **God's time** will be revealed in other ways....and I am grateful that I had that unexpected mystical experience...that continues to inform my life.

Advent is always coming....

And as stated in one of the last lines of the Book of Revelation: **Come, Lord Jesus, Come.**

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