

ADVENT OF HOPE

NOVEMBER 30, 2008

Advent Sunday is here whether we are ready or not. For some it begins a race to “get everything done in time” whatever that means while for others, Advent begins a journey of faith and faith renewal. It really is about how we view the time and the end event which is Christmas Day, the celebration of the birth of the Son of God.

Advent is laced with the aspect of hope. Hope is at the very heart of the event and the very heart of our Christian belief. Though it may be true that we may not understand fully the great significance of Christmas, nevertheless we do find ourselves drawn to the wonder of the event.

This morning, in the children’s time, we sang together the old nursery song: “Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are, up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky, twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.”

All of us can remember I am sure the rush of excitement and wonder over the Christmas events. You can still experience this wonder when you take a child to the mall decorated for Christmas. Watch their eyes grow bigger, their smile grow broader, their feet begin to dance, their voices rise in shouts of joy.

This goes well beyond mere appreciation of the scene; it is the realization of something wonderful, out of the ordinary which evokes their reactions. This kind of wonder and excitement calls forth action; who can stand or sit still when confronted suddenly with the beauty of the scene before us.

Have you ever been getting ready to go to an event which has music and dancing while you feel stressed or tired as you get yourself ready to leave for the event? Upon arriving at the location, you hear music and the hubbub of people talking and your spirits lift. Your previously tired feet suddenly start to tap in time to the music and you enter into the festivities and discover new energy. New life you find out once again is very possible and you move into the spirit of the activities with a new outlook.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and we lit our first Advent Candle, the Candle of Hope. Advent has as its very heart the sense of hope and wonder. We are on a journey together over the next 25 days, a journey we would not want nor should not want to miss. It is a journey of faith, a faith journey with our eyes wide open and our hearts eager to respond to God’s wondrous gift.

There are thousands of people out there who wonder why we bother with all this faith stuff. Why do we keep searching; why do we celebrate the rituals of worship; why do we see hope and joy in the midst of what appears to be mere crass commercialism? Why bother?

Martin Luther, the great German Protestant theologian, says this about faith, a quote I appreciate:

“Faith is a free surrender and a joyous wager on the unseen, unknown, untested goodness of God.”

Faith can never be fully proven. For most of us, we have no desire to wait until everything is proven. There is something in us which looks at the world around us with all its beauty and its many imperfections, where we see and experience both love and turmoil. We respond to our inner sense. We believe there is more to life than we can ever comprehend or fully know.

The quote of Luther picks this up. We are a people of hope in a God who is ever present, ever powerful, ever loving and ever forgiving. There are many people of all walks of life who say they would give anything to be certain there is a God so they could also believe. People write books and lecture on the folly of belief in a divine being and blame all the ills of the earth on the belief systems of religious people. There is no doubt that faith communities are often not the best examples of love and tolerance, but this does not negate the existence of the God they attempt to serve.

Coming down on the side of hope does not mean we would not like to know everything there is to know. We trust but we would like to know even more. Since we do not know anything absolutely, we trust in what we believe based on what we have seen and experienced.

Where is our faith born? Can you remember any mountaintop experience when you suddenly found yourself able to believe? Was there a moment when you could see God? For many there is not the one flash moment but rather faith is an accumulation of experiences which opened the door to our personal faith.

I recall as if yesterday being present at the birth of my daughter. No one, I believe, could watch this event and not be filled with wonder. How could all of this have been purely an accident? Surely some great mind was behind this design. To feel the rush of love which is immediate and without contemplation for this little creature who has fought to enter the world and whose mother has endured so much that they might have life. Prior to this birth I had some idea of what it would mean to be a father – I had seen my father and others in that role. It was only with that first cry of life of this new creature, that the reality and the wonder of the role before me breathed life into the term father and I knew my commitment to the role was no longer hypothetical but the role was truly mine and no one would be able to take it away from me.

Mountaintop experiences; we all have them to some degree. A mountaintop experience is that moment when you suddenly find yourself able to believe. You know God is there. Faith is born.

It is not always a flash moment; we all come to the moment of belief in our journey and it need not duplicate the experience of another. However, we have come to a point where faith is real for us.

People naturally yearn for that moment of certainty when we will know all and all doubt will pass away.

Doubt however is part of faith. You remember that well known prayer: “I believe; help thou my unbelief.” Faith and doubt, they travel hand in hand.

Hope, that very human yearning when things are tough and when all appears to be so hopeless. As I travelled to so many different countries and places in my life, I was struck by not only the problems of poverty, disease, injustice, war and famine, but also the will of people not only to survive but to thrive in the midst of seeming hopelessness. People still give birth to children in the midst of the toughness of their circumstances in the hope their children will experience a better life than they have endured.

For centuries, people of the Bible had hoped for the coming of God into the world. They treasured their history as God’s people. They carried around the Ark of the Covenant, the wooden case which held the Ten Commandments carved on the rock by Moses. When the ark was present, they felt God was there. They even took this ark into battle.

One day, the deliverance they had prayed for so many years came in a way that nobody was looking for. God came back to his people, not in a box to be carried around, but in a man. John’s Gospel states: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This phrase “dwelt among us” is interesting. The word dwelt literally is the word in Hebrew for “tabernacle” – “tabernacled or tented among us.” Because the tabernacle was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was, that was where the Israelites thought of God dwelling.

John Ortberg comments on this: “The Word became flesh, and dwelt (tabernacled) among us and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the father.” John 1:14. Ortberg says it was a funny kind of glory. It came in a strange combination of humility, loneliness, and fearlessness. Nobody could tame Jesus. Nobody – not the politicians, not the Zealots, not the religious leaders – nobody could use him. Nobody could manipulate him to get what they wanted. Nobody could shut him up. So in the end, those who were in power took him and lashed him with a whip and pierced him with a sword and hung him on a cross. Then his body was laid in a tomb.

Ortberg goes on to say the thing about Jesus is that you can’t keep him in a cage. He never was a cage kind of guy. The authorities didn’t know it, but death wasn’t defeat for him. The third day after the crucifixion, the crucified carpenter came back to life. You never know what God is going to do, because God is the God of the third day. God is the God of hope. With God, you never know what God might do on the third day. Our hope is in this third day God.

Advent is a time of hope, a time when we are reminded that life on earth is more than day to day existence or our daily grind to survive and provide for ourselves and others. Paul in our reading this morning from his first letter to the church in Corinth, states that God is faithful, He has called you into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Faith in God for us is not only a comfort but a statement of our belief in who we are, whose we are and who we intend to follow through our time here on earth and in the time thereafter.

Nicholas Wolterstorff speaks of faith as the great leap. He sees faith as a footbridge which you do not know will hold you up over the chasm until you are forced to walk out onto it. The leap of faith we take as we give our hearts, soul and mind to God.

So we celebrate the beginning of Advent, the time of preparation for the birth of God's Son. We are filled with hope for unlike the early apostles, we know the full story of Jesus Christ. The first followers of Jesus knew Jesus was unique and quickly followed him in his ministry. They knew Jesus was special and painted for them a picture of God they could understand and follow.

We too want to follow the Christ. We too want to prepare for the events to unfold. We too want to follow the star in wonder and awe. We too want to glimpse the rapture of heaven as the events unfold which leads to the birth in human form of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Hope, that great sustaining power that gets us through tough times and causes us to step out in faith and wonder to a relationship with God that is intimate, comforting and beyond what we know we deserve. The birth of Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, God's break into the history of man and women to proclaim in living form how much he loves us. How can we not but respond to him in wonder and hope. Thanks be to God. Amen

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