

## ***Second Sunday of Advent***

December 8, 2019

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*Isaiah 11: 1-10*

*Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19*

*Romans 15: 4-13*

*Matthew 3: 1-12*

***Holy gracious God, take our minds and think through them; take our hands and feet and work through them; take our lips and speak through them, take our hearts and set them on fire for you. Amen.***

Advent is the season of waiting and preparation leading all of us up to Christmas. It is a time of happiness, celebration, and hopeful anticipation of the arrival of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The task of preparing for the arrival of the Lord is not as easy as we might think it is. Waiting can also be hard. Most people don't like to wait. The season of Advent requires "active waiting" ... it encourages us to prepare and anticipate the arrival of Jesus.

Last week was the beginning of the Advent Season; the start of preparing the way for the Birth of Christ. There's little doubt about what most of us will be doing in the next few weeks. The Christmas rush to get everything organized, cards written, gifts bought or ordered and sent, the preparation of food, plans about whose turn it is to go visiting, and anxieties about who'll be offended if we don't pay them enough attention. The rush is on, and it's not surprising that there's often a hint of panic in people's conversations: "I'll never be ready!"

During the holiday season, many people find themselves wondering, "***Are you the One Jesus? The light that will break through the darkness?***" But, if we take Advent seriously, we shall have had the opportunity to reflect again on what it means to say that God came into the world in the humility of the birth at Bethlehem, and that he still comes into the world in all its mess and pain and joy, longing for us to recognize Him.

And, in less than three weeks it'll all be over, in about four weeks a new year will have brought us another set of resolutions, in five weeks the decorations will have come down, the furniture of life will be back in place, and we will be back to – what? Will life be just the same, or will we be changed?

Consider this encounter with darkness and light that a refugee family experienced as the Second World War raged in Europe during Christmas Eve in 1944.

Mother, with four small children, had fled our native Ukraine with the retreating German army. Father had been reported missing in action.

Now we were refugees living in a two-room shack in Dieter Wald, Poland. But again the fighting front was only about fifty kilometers (30 miles) away. Frequent air raids sent us scurrying for cover. Explosions rattled the windows. Army trucks brought in the wounded and the dead. Hay wagons filled with refugees rumbled west; bombers droned overhead and army tanks rolled east. The underground resistance attacked innocent women and children at night.

Nobody in his right mind went out into the dark winter night.

And yet, it was Christmas Eve. Two women had prepared a Christmas party in a neighboring village and invited us. Mother, wanting to give us children joy, accepted.

She instructed my sister and me to dress warmly against the winter's cold. "Tonight we're going to a party," she said. Being only eight-years old, I sensed no danger--only wondrous excitement.

Hurriedly my sister, two years younger, and I dressed. If only Mother would hurry! A simple wick flickered in a saucer of oil--our only light. We could barely see her shadowy form as she bustled about getting my four-year-old brother, Fred, and almost two-year-

old sister, Katie, ready. Finally Mother was putting on her heavy winter coat, kerchief, and warm felt boots.

With one small breath, she blew out the oil lamp. It was pitch dark now.

"Open the door, Lena," she called to me.

We stepped onto the crisp snow covering the farmyard. A moon crescent hung above a large house across the yard where the estate owners lived--kind people who treated us refugees well. It, too, was shrouded in darkness.

Mother lifted Katie and shuffled her to her back: she'd carry her piggyback for three miles.

"Hang tight onto my coat collar," she coaxed. Then, turning towards us girls, she said, "You take Fred's hands."

At the road, we stopped. Although I knew it well from my treks to school, I could barely make out the houses on either side of the street. No street lights were allowed now. Windows heavily draped permitted no light to seep out of the houses.

My mother hesitated for a brief moment. Then she said, "Come, we'll take the shortcut across the fields."

The snow crunched as four pairs of feet punched holes in the white expanse of open fields. Stars spangled the vault of sky above us. A blood-red glow smeared the eastern sky. At times an explosion sent flames shooting into the sky.

"Girls, recite your poems to me." Mother's voice sounded a bit shaky. Her arms aching, she put Katie down on the snowy ground. Our recitations of Christmas poems made white puffs in the cold night air.

When we finished, Mother said, "Speak up loud and clear when your turn comes. No mumbling."

She lifted Katie once more onto her back, and we began to walk again. On and on we walked. But we were far too excited to be tired.

Finally we arrived at our friends' house. The door opened and we stepped inside. I felt I had stepped into heaven itself. Lights! A whole room-full of lights.

Candlelight flickered from a small Christmas tree and bounced out of happy children's eyes. Heavily draped windows kept the light inside--for us to revel in. Red paper chains decked the tree; delicate paper cherubs smiled down upon us.

We squeezed in amongst women and children sitting on the floor. Soon the room filled with singing: Silent Night, Holy Night. Some mothers sang alto, the rest of us, soprano. We sang with gusto and from memory, songs that lifted our hearts above the terrors of war and inspired new hope for the days ahead.

I can't remember our long trek home that night, but I do remember the wonderful gifts I received; my right pocket bulged with the most beautiful ball I'd ever seen. A very colorful ball it was. Much later, I learned it had been made out of scrunched up rags wrapped in rainbow colored yarn probably gleaned from unravelling old sweaters. The other pocket held three cookies!

Soon after that wonderful Christmas party, we were evacuated. Icy winds blew snow into our faces as we cowered on an uncovered hay wagon pulled by two scrawny horses. With the front so close behind, we traveled day and night. Once it was safe to stop, we slept in drafty barns. We ate hunks of frozen bread and drank the occasional cup of milk supplied by a Red Cross jeep.

But the warm memory of that Christmas celebration shone like a small candle in the darkness.

Even years later, when my own life's circumstances seemed too bleak to celebrate Christmas, I remembered the truth of Christmas born in my heart that night: **Jesus, the light of the world** came to us at Christmas time and no amount of darkness can put out that light.

Advent reminds us that we live in two worlds, the one that appears to be going crazy all around us, and the one that lives by the kingdom of God. Passages of Scriptures read during Advent, and in the Book of Common Prayer Collect for Advent, remind us that **NOW** is the time when we have to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the light. Advent is a time when we meet God.

Advent is a time when we create a space so that our understanding of God's love for us and our love for God in response can grow. The world is saying, "Get on with it – don't wait for Christmas to hold the celebrations." Advent says. "Wait, be still, alert and expectant, light your candles and live by the light." Rick Hamlin, Executive Editor of Guideposts magazine made this statement in the Daily Guideposts book of Meditations: *"Let me prepare in my heart, Lord, as I prepare my home, a place for Your coming."*

*(Pause)*

Advent is rapidly disappearing. Time is no friend when it comes to being ready to meet the Lord when he comes! If only I had more time to get ready! There is a cry from the secular world about getting ready for the season, the worry that time is running out, but it is a different cry from the one that John the Baptist makes when he emerges from the desert! The secular cry is about making sure the turkey is bought and prepared, the food, the drink, the presents, the sheer craziness of it all!

For Christians during Advent season we become aware of what it is we are preparing for. The cards we send, the presents we give and receive, the parties we celebrate, the food we share, the family gatherings, all flow from our gratitude towards God for his goodness in sending his Son to save us. Our joy comes from our waiting for the Lord to return

again. We come to worship, to be filled with awe as we kneel at the stable and marvel at the love of God!

We are all created for heaven, and it is through our choices in life that we grow spiritually. Our physical lives are our season of Advent, our time of preparation and of “getting there.” The light and warmth of the candles—the Lord’s love and wisdom—both sustain and lead us on our journeys. The end of the journey is home: a Bethlehem stable, a family home, heaven.

The shopping days will come to an end – there will come a moment when we really can’t do any more. *But, the point is getting into the habit of remembering God, who comes to us each and every day. God who longs for us to respond with our love and service.*

### **Prayer for Advent**

*God for whom we wait, in this season of waiting teach us patience, trust and perseverance. In this season of darkness help us to seek the light, that we may be ready to hear the good news of great joy. In this season of expectation may we experience anew the blessing of Christ as we welcome him into our hearts and lives.*

**AMEN.**

*Resources:*

*Sermon Central Resources for Preaching and Teaching*

*The Text This Week: Scripture Study, Worship Links, and Resources*

*Connections November 2014*

*Daily Guideposts 2014 Christmas Meditations*

*NRSV Study Bible*