

Advent: Preparing for a Special Time

Rev. Mark Hayes

December 9, 2007

Advent has probably been observed since the fourth century. Originally, it was a time when Christians readied themselves for baptism. During the Middle Ages, Advent became associated with preparation for the Second Coming. Indeed, the word advent means “coming” or “arrival.” In early days Advent lasted from November 11, the feast of St. Martin, until Christmas Day. The Council of Tours in the year 567 established the period of Advent as a time of fasting before Christmas.

Advent is a creation of the Western churches that looked to Rome as their leader. There were two main streams flowing into it. The first came out of France, during the fourth century CE, probably from Celtic monks. A period of about six weeks before Christ's Mass was used as a penitential and devotional period, a lesser Lent. The second stream came from Rome, where there was a practice of having a three-to-six week fast during which you had to come to church regularly. This was a fast before the feast of Christmas time.

The current form of Advent crystallized under Pope Gregory I, who set the current four-week length, and wrote liturgical materials for use in Advent. By the 10th century, the Celtic 'get ready' prayers and practices had been fully brought into the Roman form. Later on, the church adopted a system of liturgical colors, and Advent received a purple color, associated with penitence.. The 20th century brought a rediscovery of joy in Advent preparations; this was signaled among Protestants by using the color blue.

The familiar carol "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," which we sang this morning, belongs to the Advent season since it celebrates the expectation of Christ's coming rather than His actual birth.

In many countries, Advent was long marked by diverse popular observances, some of which still survive. In England, especially in the northern counties, there was a custom (now extinct) for poor women to carry around the "Advent images", two dolls dressed to represent Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary. A halfpenny was expected from every one to whom these were exhibited, and bad luck was thought to menace the household not visited by the doll-bearers before Christmas Eve at the latest.

In Normandy, farmers employed children under twelve to run through the fields and orchards armed with torches, setting fire to bundles of straw, and thus it is believed driving out such vermin as are likely to damage the crops. In Italy, among other Advent celebrations, is the entry into Rome in the last days of Advent of the Calabrian *pifferari*, or bagpipe players, who play before the shrines of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Italian tradition being that the shepherds played these pipes when they came to the manger at Bethlehem to pay homage to the infant Jesus.

Contemporary observances of Advent include, primarily, the lighting of symbolic candles in the Advent wreath, as we did this morning, and the use of special liturgical elements, such as songs and prayers, that focus on the themes of the season. All of this occurs, typically, not only in communal church settings, but also in many families' homes.

For many of us, as Unitarian Universalists, the theological underpinnings of holidays like Christmas, and observances like Advent, don't necessarily carry the same weight of meaning and importance as they do for our Christian brothers and sisters. But our religious heritage, and our culture, are still deeply intertwined with the customs and the celebrations associated with

Christianity. And so we are faced with the choice of either separating ourselves from our past and our culture by leaving such customs and celebrations behind, or embracing our heritage and adapting it in such a way that we can still find meaning in its symbols and themes.

We need not focus on Jesus' birth as a one-time incarnation of God on earth, or as the coming of the one special Savior. And yet, I believe we may readily embrace the themes of hope, and love, and joy, and peace. Those are not exclusively Christian values; they are human values. And I believe we may also benefit by reflecting on the idea of waiting on, or preparing for, a better time, a special time. And so I welcome the season of Christmas, and the time of Advent leading up to it, as a reminder to pause and reflect on some of those timeless themes.

There are a number of things I want, particularly, to lift up this morning. First is the relationship between waiting and preparing. "Just" waiting is passive. Preparing is active. Active preparation may help to usher in our hopes and expectations. But, if nothing else, it can help us to be ready for whatever is to come.

Second, I want us to be sure and recognize the importance of cultivating positive spiritual qualities both in our individual, personal lives, and in our wider social and political lives. My main emphasis today will be on starting close to home, with ourselves.

With those ideas in mind, I'd like to explore briefly those four qualities symbolized by our Advent candles: hope, love, joy, and peace.

Hope: Thornton Wilder once wrote:

Hope is a projection of the imagination; so is despair. Despair all too readily embraces the ills it foresees; hope is an energy and arouses the mind to explore every possibility to combat them. . . In response to hope the imagination is aroused to picture every possible issue, to try every door, to fit together even the most heterogeneous pieces in the puzzle. After the solution has been found it is difficult to recall the steps taken – so many of them are just below the level of consciousness.

A story: At the university there was a piano teacher simply and affectionately known as "Herman." One night at a university concert, a distinguished pianist suddenly became ill while performing an extremely difficult piece. No sooner had the artist retired from the stage when Herman rose from his seat in the audience, walked onstage, sat down at the piano, and with great mastery completed the performance. Later that evening, at a party, one of the students asked Herman how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully without notice and with no rehearsal. He replied, "In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practice every day. I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare board bed late one night. The next night I added a second piece and soon I was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years. It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was a part of that repertoire. That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Every day I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom."

Hope, symbolized at this season of the year by the birth of a child, represents the ever-present promise of a new future. But hope can be hard work. May we have the courage to dare to keep hope alive.

Love: A man was trying to read a serious book, but his little boy kept interrupting him. The child would lean against his knees and say, “Daddy, I love you.” The father would give him a pat and say, rather absently, “Yes, son, I love you too,” and he would kind of give him a little push away so he could keep on reading. But this didn’t satisfy the boy, and finally he ran to his father and said, “I love you, Daddy,” and jumped up on his dad’s lap and threw his arms around him and gave him a big squeeze, explaining, “And I’ve just got to DO something about it!” That’s it – as we grow in love, we aren’t content with small-talk love, or pat-on-the-head love. We want to get involved and “do something about it.”

May our love be of the sort that cries out for doing something. And may the love and compassion that we feel find expression in our actions both within and beyond our own family and community.

Joy: A man had just had his annual physical exam and was waiting for the doctor’s initial report. After a few minutes the doctor came in with his charts in his hand and said, “There’s no reason why you can’t live a completely normal life, as long as you don’t try to enjoy it.” Although it sometimes seems like many of the things that bring us joy are bad for us, I hope that even our “completely normal” and healthy lives will include significant helpings of joy and happiness. Nathaniel Hawthorne once wrote that “Happiness is a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you.” That rings true for me. But does that imply the kind of passive waiting that I have spoken out against? Not really. Actions consciously designed to achieve joy or happiness may well be futile. But, paradoxically, it may well be our actions that help to bring joy and happiness to us. As George Bernard Shaw put it:

This is the true joy in life: being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. The being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

Sometimes letting go of the selfish quest for personal happiness, and concerning ourselves with something larger than ourselves, will open the door that will let in the butterfly of joy.

Peace: A retired couple was alarmed by the threat of nuclear war, and so they undertook a serious study of all the inhabited places on the globe. Their goal was to determine where in the world would be the place to be least likely affected by a nuclear war. A place of ultimate security. They studied and traveled, traveled and studied. Finally, they found *the place*. And on Christmas they sent their pastor a card from their new home – in the Falkland Islands, which was shortly turned into a war zone by Great Britain and Argentina.

Again, the search for a peaceful corner of the world would seem to be futile. Perhaps we would be better served to heed the wisdom of Lao-tse:

If there is to be peace in the world,
 there must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
 there must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,

there must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
there must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
there must be peace in the heart.

And so, if we wish for peace, perhaps we should begin by cultivating it first in our own hearts, and then in our own homes and neighborhoods, where we can actually have some effect.

By cultivating hope, love, joy, and peace within ourselves and in our immediate surroundings, we not only nourish the inner strength to cope and to thrive, but we also cast seeds out into the world around us. Seeds of hope, love, joy, and peace that – if we wait patiently and hopefully – may indeed take root and grow and blossom in days yet to come.

May it be so. May we make it so.