

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Opeh"
Dr. J. Dent

November 27, 2011
First Sunday of Advent

And so we begin again. A new year. Another Advent and Christmas...none of us know if this is our last or if we will have many, many more. Every year we are amazed at how fast it comes and how fast it goes. Every year we wonder at what we will buy for others. Every year the preacher tries to tell everyone that the season is a spiritual one with spiritual goals. The preacher preaches to himself, too. But how do we get back to the spiritual center for our lives?

And we struggle to make the time for quiet. We struggle to hear what God wants to say about our lives, about our contribution to our families and to humanity, what the true value of who we are is all about. Many of us struggle to hope in this season.

We hope that it will be better than what we experienced as children. We hope it will be better for our children and our grandchildren than it was for us. I had all kinds of material things, but I never really did get the season. I saw my father upset over the Christmas tree and how the decorations were hung. I don't remember anything about how my brothers responded to the night before Christmas, which was when we opened our gifts, at least I think that's what happened.

Advent, this first season of the Church year is meant to celebrate the coming of our Lord, the second coming and to take time to prepare to celebrate the incarnation, the marvel and wonder of God becoming human and making a way to have a relationship with us. Advent is a time to prepare. In centuries past, it was a time for most to prepare their hearts for giving to the Lord. What would we offer to Christ of ourselves?

Now it is a neurotic and frantic season. We are worried about so many things. And in our worry and anxiety, we forget the meaning. We miss it. And so I am here to say to myself and to you, "Take the time to be quiet. Take the time to remember the wonder of Jesus, coming as a baby, and coming again as the great King."

This year we are again studying the gospel of Mark, the second year of the three year lectionary cycle. In Mark 13, we hear the Lord teaching us about the end of the world.

He says that we know how to interpret what's going on in the garden or orchard. In that land where Jesus was teaching, everyone knew about when figs would come, in what season, with what conditions bringing them to being a wonderful, sweet fiber-filled fruit to enjoy. Jesus will visibly come again and all will see him, then the end will come, along with other astronomical anomalies. He will be the ultimate UFO. But he will not be unidentified.

No one knows the day or the hour (or the weekend for that matter). Someone once told me that you can't know the day or the hour but you can know the weekend... No, we don't know. We do know that Jesus is as real as he was two thousand years ago, and he really is returning. So he is now like a business man who went away on a long trip and left all his resources to his business colleagues to manage while he was away. That's us. We are his business colleagues, the Church, in all its many expressions. But we must know he will come again, and so we need to be alert spiritually, not sleepy, not ignorant, not cocky, but aware.

The point is carrying on his business with all the importance that there is to managing God's ways here on earth. In the past, we have thought the culture will carry Jesus's way and will, but now we see that it is not that way anymore. We call the season a happy holiday, and the trees are holiday trees and the children learn about Rudolph and Frosty and Santa, but not the real story behind the holy day and season.

Jesus urges us to stay awake. He is not against physical sleep. God built us for sleep. But he is urging us to not go to sleep spiritually, that is, saying that it does not matter what we believe or what anyone else believes. It does. It matters if we reach out in Jesus' name. It matters if we have a ministry to our families and our neighborhoods and our colleagues at work and in our schools and in our places of recreation. It matters if we tell our stories of why we believe this one has made such a difference in our lives. It matters. It's not the Grinch that steals Christmas. It's not the secularizing culture that steals Christmas. It is you and I choosing to place other holiday stuff above the center of it all that steals Christmas. We bear the center of the season in ourselves.

So you are here and you are ready, or not, for Christmas. It hits us like the snow did on Thursday. It hits us like the door to the church being rekeyed on the weekend by one of our renters without us knowing it. It hits us in the middle of whatever we are choosing to do this year, or not.

The season comes upon us even when hope is scrambled in our lives and we are wondering how we are going to make it through. That's the reason I scrambled the letters in hope as the sermon title. Because our own experience of the season can be very mixed with all kinds of emotions, memories, losses, you name it.

This is the time we take time for others. We do the hampers for those in need. We encourage you to somehow make life better for those around you. We remember with the help of innumerable movies that it is about giving. But when we ourselves are empty, what can we give? When we ourselves are lacking hope, what can we give?

That's when we look to the Lord, and we look to each other for help. We can pray for each other, in simple words. "Lord, help so and so to give her life and concerns to you this week, this day." Lord, touch so and so's body with your health and wholeness." You don't need fancy words, just a heart to care for others, to intercede for others.

It's also a time to admit when we feel hopeless. There is no shame in admitting the way we really feel. We open up so others can help us be thankful, and acknowledge what is going right in our lives, even if many things seem to be off. We need other's spiritual gifts as Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 1. These are not gifts you can put under the tree. We need other's encouraging words, acts of service, a hug when appropriate and some insight into our situation when we cannot see beyond where we are. At least I do.

This is time to help each other. This is a time to ask ourselves who we want to be as a church for each other. Amy is working on getting activities for our youth. We are working on making sure the Creche, the Nursery is staffed. We are working on getting new elders, which will be some of you, God willing. We are working on establishing new elders' districts which instead of being geographical, they will be by age, under 40, 40 to 65, and

over 65. We are also working on new districts to encourage our young families and our university connections. We are working on all these things.

We hope all this with the ongoing challenges of renovating the church building and various maintenance projects will all be a part of the new year. But more than thinking of ourselves as the building is each of us reaching out to others we have not known, here and beyond.

It is as easy as meeting someone new today over choir soup. Just branch out and introduce yourself. It is as easy as inviting a friend to next week's TSO and extended choir Christmas music service, or to the pageant the week after that. We are in a season to naturally invite others to church, and to spread the hope we have. We will also spread the joy and peace and love, as God gives grace.

Let us rise to the occasion. Let us pray.