

ADVENT – A TIME FOR REFLECTION  
Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 1: 26-35  
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The Advent season is coming to a conclusion, believe it or not, and as usual, it is met with mixed reactions -- some are glad, like your grandchildren or your children. They're happy it's almost over. They are now counting off the days, and with each new one, it seems that their excitement level increases. They're glad Christmas is here. They love everything about Christmas time.

But some are not overjoyed, because Christmas is a lot of trouble and a lot of responsibility. and we are not too sure we enjoy all that -- fighting the crowds, addressing the cards and hoping that we won't leave anybody out this year, planning for parties, special solicitations - Christmas is a lot of trouble, and who enjoys trouble?

We can easily come to the conclusion that indeed, Christmas is for children, but I don't buy that one bit. Christmas is the celebration of God's coming to us in Christ, of God's coming to where we are, to bring us some good news. What God told us needs to be celebrated over and over again - for God so loved the world that God gave the only Son."

Christmas is a time for reflection -- a time to pause a few moments, to remember just exactly what it is we are to be and do for Christ. It's a time to reflect upon our commitment to Christ.

Luke, who wrote our famous Christmas story, wasn't there when the first Christmas occurred. He wrote what was told to him, but he wrote it down because he wanted it to be remembered. Every time these early Christians celebrated this Christmas event, it was a time for remembering - remembering what God had done for them in Christ, and to reflect and re-evaluate what they ought to be doing in response to that.

What do we need to remember?

We need to recapture a proper perspective about life. Christmas came to a group of people who were discouraged and depressed about the way things were. These folk were an oppressed people - under the heel of the Romans. They were a people who suffered - many of them lived in poverty. They worked for little. They had to struggle just to survive. They were even disappointed in God, for they had been crying out for hundreds of years, and God had not said a word. There hadn't been a prophet to Israel for over 300 years.

They felt hopeless -- nothing in their world was going to change. And they not only felt hopeless, but they felt helpless -- they couldn't do anything about solving the problems. But then a birth in a manger and a baby comes. It was reminder that God had not given up, and that God cared for them.

We need to remember that, for it's easy for us to give into depression or cynicism. Problems beset us on every side. Too many people are unemployed, too many hungry and homeless, too many poor. We have wars and rumors of wars all across our world. There is no peace. And to those we can add all of

our own personal ones. How easy it is for us to be overwhelmed by our concerns to the point of either burying our heads in helplessness or closing our hearts in hopelessness. It's easy, isn't it, to feel overwhelmed by life.

But then Christmas comes to remind us that God has not abandoned us, either. God has not disappeared; God is still around -- still working with us -- and it is God's world.

Binoculars are interesting instruments to play with. There is a pair at our family cottage and they are used for looking at birds or watching the boats on the bay. You know that when you look through one end, what is big suddenly becomes small, and then you look through the other end and what is small becomes large. Our concerns do the same -- they can cause us to lose our perspective. And what Christ does and Advent ought to challenge us to do, is to do some re-focusing -- to try to get our problems in perspective, to try to remember that God is indeed with us. And we can trust God. We can live with hope -- as long as it is still God's world.

Reflecting on a new perspective on life, yes; and second, we need to recapture the vision of concern for one another. Christmas was a love gift. It came to people who didn't deserve it; but God cared and came in love to overwhelm them with love. It was love not to be kept but love to be shared.

Advent ought to be a time when we renew our commitments to one another and to all God's children. And strangely, it seems that we feel that way at Christmas. We have gifts for children, and people who stand over Salvation Army pots collecting money. People do call up every now and then and say, "I've got some money. Do you know somebody who needs food or toys or clothes?"

During Advent, people feel drawn closer to one another. And this is what Christ came to try to do. Christ came to try and draw us together in love; to build the kingdom of God which was the family of humanity under Christ's leadership.

A religious seeker came to a holy man and said, "What is it that is truth? When will I know the dawn comes and the darkness goes? Will it be when I can tell a sheep from a dog?" And the man said, "No." "Will it be when I can tell a peach from a pomegranate?" "No." The holy man said, "The darkness will flee only when you can look at any woman or any man and say, 'You are my sister, you are my brother.' Only then is there dawn."

The late David H.C. Read, a Presbyterian minister in New York City, spent five years in a German prisoner of war camp in World War II. He wrote of an experience of celebrating Christmas for the fifth time in that prison camp. It was a very depressing time. The gloom was thick, for the Germans had just launched their desperate Battle of the Bulge, and prisoners didn't know what in the world was happening. Their Red Cross packages had quit coming through. No word came from home. The fuel supply in the camp was low. It was cold. And one night they had just eaten a very meager supper when suddenly the air raid sirens sounded. He did what he usually did in those times -- he went to his bunk, and there in the total darkness, just lay quietly. He lay there for about an hour when he began to hear the sound of a piano accompanying a tenor voice singing in the dining hall. Now, this was against the camp rules; so Dr. Read got his clothes on and snuck over to the dining hall to see what was going on. He

crept into a corner of it. There was thunder in the distance, and the lightning was flashing, and one especially bright flash of lightning lit up that dining hall, revealing that everybody in the camp was cramped into that small dining hall.

Sitting at the piano, a German guard, dressed in his gray uniform, was singing and playing music. He played for a little while, then stopped; and in the darkness people began to applaud him. He continued playing and singing beautiful music for about two hours.

They learned later that he was an opera star before the war. They never saw him again after that, but for two hours in the middle of the war he was their Christmas angel, filling their lives, and reminding them that love is possible. Where love is, all barriers go down.

Finally, we need to renew our own commitment of discipleship. It's easy, isn't it, with all the pressures of life to let our discipleship weaken? Become less than it ought to be? To let others do the work that we know we ought to -- we're content to let them do it, so we become spectators, not participants.

Several weeks ago, I was at a meeting at the Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church. That's a very significant place in my life. In that church was the first time I felt the call of God into the ministry. In that church I preached my first sermon ever and was united in marriage. In that church I was ordained to the ministry. As I sat there, seeing some of the folks, I remembered many who had been very instrumental in my life. I remembered the promises I made and the commitments, and I needed that time for reflection.

It's something all of us need; to go back in our minds and in our hearts to that place where we began, to remember our promises in the light of a manger, of a cross, and of the empty tomb, to say, "I'll keep those promises, I'll keep them."

Christmas ought to be for every one of us a time for a new commitment to discipleship. It is a time for reflection, and when better than right now to take these moments to pause and to reflect and to be reminded of a new perspective on life. To remind ourselves that in spite of all the problems, God is still God -- and can be trusted. To remember that we are here to try to reach out to one another and build a community -- not live in isolation, but together. It is the time for us to renew the vows and promises we made way back then, to say that we meant them, and that we intend to live by them. So take time to reflect -- and in that reflection -- to renew! Thanks be to God. Amen.