

The cleansing effect of Advent

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2016.

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Romans 13:12

This season of Advent is a time of anticipation and expectation. Advent is from the Latin, *Adventus*, referring to that which is to come. Advent recalls how the people of God waited in anticipation for the coming of a Messiah to save them. That hope was realized as God entered human history in the birth of Jesus Christ. In the midst of all our activity of preparing for Christmas holidays, we celebrate our redemption in which we are given worth and value as a people of God.

Eight centuries before the birth of Christ, the prophet Isaiah foresaw the time when God's people would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, when nation would not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:5) In the early Christian era, Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans urges us to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. (Romans 12:12) He exhorts us to live honorably by exercising self-control in all things. He urges us to cast off the old garments of licentiousness, debauchery, quarreling and jealousy and put on the new garment of being in a right relationship with God and with each other.

Jesus warns us to be prepared for the time when he will appear unexpectedly when we least expect it. He appears every time we are confronted with making ethical and moral decisions and rely on what love demands. We have to be awake and alert for those crucial times in which we must stand for what is right and good and true in the face of all that is wrong and evil and false.

Putting on the armor of light requires a new kind of climate change, a change in the climate of our attitude. We must have an attitude of tolerance and respect for diversity and reject extremist attitudes. There is no place for vulgar and vile behavior, no place for bigotry, racism, misogyny, xenophobia or bullying. Such attitudes and behaviors have always been wrong and still are. If we find ourselves in confrontation resulting in alienation from family and friends, the best way for reconciliation is to keep open the lines of communication. Listening is as important as speaking but there are times when we can't remain silent in the face of what we strongly disagree. We can disagree without causing alienation. We can wish them well and respect their right to their opinion. Forget about your pride. Forget about their faults. We have enough of our own. The challenge is to respect those whose opinions make no sense to you and who probably feel the same way about you. Loving our neighbor as ourselves simply means respecting them as fellow human beings. The most persuasive argument is not so much what we say, but in setting our best example in our manner of life.

In this season of shorter days and longer nights, remain in contact with others is essential to avoid feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Ignorance and fear are overcome by letting the inner light of Christ shine through to the hope of better understanding. The custom of lighting candles on the dinner table, putting lights in windows and having a fire in the fireplace assures us that the light of understanding conquers ignorance and fear in the same way that love drives out hatred and fear.

Ongoing foreign and domestic violence does not mean that we are destined to live with fear and suspicion. There is a danger to overreacting to the warning that if you see something you should say something. I'm told that the police have to respond to every 9-1-1 call, no matter how trivial. A glance at a police log once showed a call from someone who saw a man walking down the street dressed in black. That could have been.

To avoid being engulfed in the frantic consumerism of this season, navigating through crowds in department stores and ordering gifts on line, remember that Christ is the greatest gift ever given and ever received. The gifts we give convey how we feel about those to whom we give them. The best gift we can give to each other is to model a life that reflects God's grace in the most authentic way. As you review Christmas gift lists, address Christmas cards, order from catalogues and shop for those last minute gifts, keep in mind who and what is at the heart of this season. Instead of being overwhelmed or depressed, let yourself be captured by the wonder and mystery of how God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

William Shakespeare, in his play, *As You Like It*, portrays a world in which we are all players on a stage. (Act 2, Scene 7) As we make our entrances and exits, we have to be alert for our cues and develop our timing and patterns to be in the right place at the right time. We remain in a state of readiness prepared to stand for what is right in the face of all that is wrong.

Advent is a time to realize how we can be part of making the peaceable kingdom a reality. Be aware of the needs of those around you. If you see homeless people on the street asking for help, give them the benefit of the doubt. Each time we respond to those in need, the kingdom of God is another step toward being a reality.

Edward Hays, writing in *The Old Hermit's Almanac*, tells us that in the medieval times monks lived on a diet of spinach as a form of penitence. I can't think of any better form of penance than a diet of spinach! It was believed that it drove out impurities in the body. Be that as it may, I am interested in cleansing the soul of any impurities of intolerance and thoughtlessness.

God did not wait to be invited to come to us in Christ, but took the initiative to intrude upon the human drama to save us from ourselves. God has a way of intervening at certain points in our lives when we least expect it. Those are the times when our plans are redirected and assumptions are challenged, reminding us that we are not in charge.

As we approach the winter solstice, Advent reminds us that Christ's light shows us the way to wholeness, integrity and authenticity. I pray that his light should come from within each of us to show the way of the great gift God's grace.