

Sermon Advent Week 2: *God Bless Us Everyone!* December 4, 2016

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined... For a Child has been born for us, a Son given to us; authority rests upon His shoulders." Isaiah 9:2,6

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you - wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your Savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel, praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors." Luke 2:8-14

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, and during these four weeks leading up to Christmas, Christians celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world... while we wait with longing and hope for the second coming of Christ, and the healing and redemption of the world. Advent is a prayerful season, and every week, as a new Advent candle is lit, we are given a different word to pray. This week's prayer-word is "hope."

This was a hard week for me. Ralph's and my friend Kevin went hiking in the mountains last Sunday, and when he didn't come home that night, his wife called Search and Rescue, and they found Kevin dead in the snow on Monday morning. Kevin had been one of my parishioners, but was now a friend, and someone who loved to talk about God with me. When I heard that Kevin died in the snow, I pictured Jesus with him, holding him, while he died. I pictured Jesus with His arms around Kevin's wife and children, holding them tightly. Kevin was only 55, and if I were in charge, I'd have a rule that that's too young to die. I can't imagine his family's grief... and I couldn't be with them... so I prayed desperately during week for all of us, for peace, for God's comfort, and for... hope.

I remembered from our many conversations about God, that Kevin came to know Jesus after living a fairly wild and unconventional life, and fell wholeheartedly in love with Him. I pictured Kevin and Jesus lying in the snow... and Kevin placing his trust, and transferring his life... into Jesus' hands. In praying I found hope... because I knew that even if dying was painful and frightening, Kevin would have known that Jesus was with him. I knew that Kevin had already placed his hope in the saving love of Christ.

This is a particularly awful time of year to lose someone. Christmastime, in the media anyway, is a time to be generous and jolly. And loss and grief can ruin that picture of happiness and abundance. And then Christmastime can feel alienatingly lonely and heart-achy. But thank God this isn't Christmas... this is Advent, and it's a time of waiting and looking for Jesus in unexpected places, like in an overcrowded store, or in the twinkly lights and carols, or in children's letters to Santa, or in a visit to someone who's homebound, or... in the death of a friend. During Advent we look for Jesus... we look for ways to make room for His coming. We look for ways to let go of what we think we must have to be happy. We look for ways to hope in Him. And we look for ways to share our hope with others.

In this Advent season we're in the company of a man named Scrooge, from Charles Dickens' classic story, *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens described Scrooge as "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner.... and that "Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways." Christmas was Scrooge's least favorite time of year, and in a conversation we heard between Scrooge and his nephew, Scrooge rejected and belittled the young man for believing that Christmas did him good. Scrooge

scorned Christmas, and detested everyone who celebrated it. Scrooge was written as an unlikeable and unredeemable character.

One Christmas Eve Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner, the late Jacob Marley. Marley's ghost is wrapped in the chains he was forced to drag with him through eternity... chains of sorrow and regret that he, like Scrooge, had valued making money over all else, with no thought for love, or family, or his fellow humans. Marley tells Scrooge that he will be visited that very night by three more ghosts: the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Future. When Marley leaves, Scrooge goes to bed, hoping that the conversation he'd with his dead partner was the result of "an undigested bit of beef". But as the clock strikes midnight, Scrooge is visited by the first ghost... the Ghost of Christmas Past.

As the ghost takes Scrooge to the past, his closed and rusty heart begins to crack open, just a little, and he cries as he witnesses the lonely and neglected child he was. He weeps for the girl he'd loved, who, realizing that his love of money was so much stronger than his love for her, released him from their engagement. He rejoices at a dance his old employer gave and sees how a little kindness from the man gave so much pleasure to Scrooge and his coworkers. And twice, as Scrooge sees the love and kindness he'd had, that he'd disregarded as of being no real value, he experiences regret that he hasn't done any small acts of kindness; he hasn't cared for the people around him; he hasn't even really seen the needs of others. Scrooge begins to recognize sorrow, regret, and compassion (the beginnings of his redemption!) but he's overwhelmed, and puts out the flame of the Ghost of Christmas Past... and exhausted and grieved, Scrooge gets back under the covers in his bed.

*A Christmas Carol*, begins in wintertime, in darkness, in “cold, bleak, biting weather.” Scrooge was much too thrifty to burn many candles for light, and his clerk, Bob Cratchit, was given only one piece of coal in his office fireplace for warmth. Scrooge encountered Marley in his cold, dark room, at the end of the day, and all of the ghosts visited Scrooge in the dead of night. Isaiah’s prophecy seems appropriate to hear alongside this story; and in wintertime when the darkness falls early; and in this season of Advent when the pastor begins a sermon on hope with a story about death.

Isaiah said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined... For a Child has been born for us, a Son given to us.” This is the story of Christmas: that God saw our darkness... our past regrets and sorrows, our wrongdoing, our careless disregard of our fellow humans... and God sent us the light of Christ. Luke’s gospel tells us that shepherds watched their sheep in the darkness... and suddenly angels filled the night sky, and God’s glory shone brightly, and angels sang to the shepherds about the hope of the world come as a Baby, who was Christ the Lord.

The Ghost of Christmas Past had a flame of light on its head... illuminating Scrooge’s tragic past, and his coldhearted inhumanity, but showing Scrooge that the darkness of his past didn’t have to keep defining him... it wasn’t who he really was. We light candles in Advent to shine light in places of hopelessness; we light candles of hope for the coming of Christ... into our hearts, into our darkness, and into the world. This week’s Advent candle is the candle of hope, and we’re invited to pray throughout these next seven days for hope. A centering spiritual practice this week can be to light a candle in your home, or at your desk, to remind you of the light of Christ. His light

illuminates the sins and mistakes of our past... but He doesn't leave us there; He invites us to accept God's mercy and forgiveness, and to share God's light and hope with the world. Christmas is a story of redemption, as Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is. Jesus came into the world to save us, to claim us as God's own, and nothing... not the past, not the present, not the future, and not even death, can separate us from God's love. Jesus came at Christmastime to bring light and hope... to each of us, and to all the world. Thank You, Jesus, for Your eternal and luminous love that shines in even the darkest places!

In a worship planning meeting this fall, Sue Renno was inspired with an idea about how to share hope. She pictured a tree here in the sanctuary where every small act of kindness, every seed of hope planted, every opportunity to be the hands and feet of Christ, could be written down and shared. So the "Tree of Kindness" was planted, and is here, for us to use throughout this holy season of Advent, while we celebrate that Christ was born in Bethlehem, Christ is born in our hearts again, and Christ will come again in victory to heal and redeem the world. All through Advent (and anytime during our singing) you're invited to come write on a gift-tag how you're sharing the light and hope of Christ, and hang it on the tree. Thank you, Sue!

Let us pray: Amazing Lord, You know our past faults and failures because You're always with us. By the power of Your Spirit, transform our regrets and heartache into acts of mercy, justice, and hope for Your children today and every tomorrow. Sustain us with the light of Your presence, and remind us always of Your redeeming love in Christ. We pray this in His name, Amen.