

## Bringing Hope

*"The celebration of **Advent** is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come."  
~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

*"God of hope, I look to you with an open heart and yearning spirit. During this Advent season, I will keep alert and awake, listening for your word and keeping to your precepts. My hope is in you."  
~ Matthew Kelly*

*"Now is the season of hope unfolding, the dark winter season, when hope waits to be born. Let us come before God with receptive and willing spirits. May our souls magnify God's name, and our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour".  
- Kate McIlhagga*

On behalf of Deacon Susan, and the Pastoral Care Committee, I have been asked to do a short reflection on **Advent**. Advent is a time of "hope" - a time of *waiting expectation* - a preparation time. Advent this year comes on the last Sunday of November, the 29th, when we will light the first candle on the Advent wreath, the candle of Hope, and say together the first Advent prayer. This is a year when *Hope* looms large - we prayerfully "hope" for an end to this pandemic and a restoration of all we knew as "normal" in our lives and in the life of the church - we "hope" for a new beginning, and exciting new journey, for our Parish of Immanuel - we "hope" that our five congregations will find peace, *hope*, joy and love in coming together as one Parish, fittingly called "*God with Us*", **Immanuel!**

I bring out my Advent wreath every year and observe this beautiful custom in my home. When I was a child we didn't have an Advent wreath *per se* until much later in my teens - but every Advent my mother would place three purple, one pink and one large white candle on the front window ledge. Each Sunday evening of Advent, just before we sat down for dinner, she would light the first, second, third, purple candles, fourth pink candle, and final white Christmas Eve candle - in order of the Sundays of Advent. We would then say a short prayer thanking God for our many blessings, praying for continued good health and prosperity and remembering those who were less fortunate, those who were ill or suffering. I must confess as a child the whole significance of what it truly meant to light those candles, to offer our prayers, was lost in the excitement of putting up the Christmas tree, decorating, delicious baking, waiting in breathless anticipation to hear Santa read out my name over the radio, and of course the arrival of the jolly old man himself on Christmas Eve and the wonders he would bring in gaily wrapped packages and bulging Christmas socks! My joy of tradition was more caught up in the "secular" than the "sacred" but I was very much aware that this magical time of the year, this joyful time of celebration, was also a quiet time of *hope*, of expectation, of waiting - not just for my mother to finally add the baby Jesus to the Creche - but the arrival of Jesus himself - the birth of the Saviour. I knew even as a child that somehow that was far more important than Santa - that there was a much greater significance in the birth of a baby than the prancing of hooves on the roof, and that jolly old figure with his sack full of toys. But to a child that jolly old figure - that Santa Claus image - loomed large.

We had a certain rhythm at Christmas that never varied. Every year in October my mother would make the Christmas fruit cake - that wonderful dark cake filled with fruit - wrapped in cheesecloth that had been liberally soaked in my Father's best rum. Then it would sit in a tightly sealed tin to "mature" and to be topped with the delectable almond paste. The wonderful smells of baking would fill our house weeks before Christmas and tins of beautifully decorated sugar cookies would magically disappear not to be seen again until closer to Christmas. The week before Christmas was pure magic! Dad and I would go to the tree lot to select the tree - it had to be just right and when it was found it was strapped to the top of the car and we headed home with our prize. It would stand outside for a day or two then brought in and put in the stand until it thawed and fell out in beautiful fragrant green waves. The tree never got decorated until

Christmas Eve and that was a process. Lights were put on first - then the decorations, lovingly packed away the previous Christmas, were carefully placed on the tree - the glorious Angel was the last and she was placed with great reverence at the very top of the tree in the place of honour (*I still possess the angel by the way, rather tattered now, but it still claims a special spot in my decorations*). Then came the part I hated - the hanging of the tinsel - each strand hung carefully - it was my job and it was tedious and boring but part of the tradition. Then dad would bring out his large wool hunting socks which would be hung on the mantle to await Santa - two of the special sugar cookies and a glass of milk would be placed by the tree for Santa and then it was off to bed. The tree was never lit until Christmas morning and when we rushed downstairs we were greeted by a virtual fairyland - the tree in all its glory and the gaily wrapped presents and the socks filled to the brim. Presents were opened amidst laughter and with hearts filled with love for all we had received both in presents and in the joyful preparations leading up to that day and the memories being made. Then there was the getting ready for church in our very finest attire - for me going to church was more about telling my friends what I got for Christmas and finding out what they had received then hearing the story of what Christmas was really all about. And of course there was the Christmas feast yet to come. And then it was over...just like that...in a twinkling of an eye Santa had come and gone - presents had been opened - treats had been eaten - and another year was soon to begin.

All that waiting - all that expectation - that hope for the perfect gift - all those delicious Christmas edibles - the lights, the music, the laughter - gone all too soon and a whole year to wait until next Christmas. **But wait...** Christmas is not just about that...isn't there a birth in the story - the birth of a Saviour - Jesus...isn't there the hope of receiving the most wonderful gift of all...the gift that defies all expectation. Isn't there something that continues...that never ends...that is constantly new and renewing...that challenges, excites, supports, comforts, brings hope, forgiveness and redemption...isn't there something that promises peace - the peace that passes all understanding. Isn't that what we should be waiting for - preparing for - this Advent. Sure lets decorate, and bake, and wrap the gifts and celebrate with friends...Santa can have a place too...but lets not forget what Advent, what Christmas really means and lets give it the place it deserves - the pride of place - in our hearts and in our homes. Lets open our hearts and our homes to receive Jesus this Christmas and every day throughout the year. A blessed Advent to you all.

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