

Advent Sermon Series 2008

*Preparing for the Gifts of Christmas 1: Prepare for Hope*

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30 November 2008

Christmas is a time of tradition. Some of those traditions are religious, some are pre-Christian, some are secular. With some traditions we know why we do them and where they came from, like the crèche scenes that can be traced to St. Francis of Assisi who wanted to experience what it was like at Christ's birth. Other traditions simply exist, for reasons no one really knows, like the pink advent candle, or fruitcake. Another of those inexplicable traditions is the labels we attach to each advent candle: hope, love, joy, peace. Sometimes faith is substituted for one of these. Where did these names come from? I don't know. Which label goes with which Sunday? Well, it varies depending on what advent resources you use. Maybe the habit arose because we think everything has to be educational. It's not enough to light a candle each Sunday during Advent; they all have to stand for something. Hope, joy, peace, and/or faith – these qualities are sort of obvious for Christmas. Maybe that's why they've stuck around so long.

Hope, love, joy, peace. We tend to think of these as emotions, something you feel. Not as something you do, something you have to work at. If anything, these are gifts, and this is the season of gift-giving. Yet none of them can be put in a box and wrapped in shiny paper. Insofar as they are gifts, they are given to us in Jesus, the Christ child, but even so, it's not like on Christmas night – bam! – we suddenly feel all these feelings or possess these qualities. These are gifts that require some preparation. Like the words all parents dread: some assembly required, battery not included. These gifts won't put themselves together!

Several of our favorite Christmas songs talk about how we have to prepare ourselves for the birth of Christ. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" contains the line, "Where meek souls will receive him still, our dear Christ enters in." If Christ is a gift, he is one that we have to prepare ourselves to receive, because of course, not everyone did receive him as a gift. Some received him as a threat. So this advent as we wait for the coming of Christ, let us consider how we need to prepare ourselves for what is coming. In particular, how we prepare ourselves for the gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace.

Hope is a concept that acquired a political meaning this election year, but that's not necessarily inappropriate. I've always felt that politics was sort of the secular version of religion, about trying to make the world a better place. Ironically these days we seem to be better about being tolerant and understanding about other religions than we are about other political views. But if we can put aside that political baggage, let's ask ourselves what exactly hope is. It has to do with wanting something, like when you were a child and you hoped for a shiny new bicycle for Christmas. Or as an adult you really hoped to get that new job, or you hope that the test results from the doctor will come back good. That's kind of like hope, except they're more like wishes. Wishes are when you want something specific. When you blow out the candles on your birthday cake, you don't wish for world peace. You wish for that bike! And wishes contain an element of fantasy. They might possibly come true, but there's an aspect of make-believe, of pretend to them. I wish I would win the lottery, and the fact that I have never bought a lottery ticket in my life is quite beside the point. It's a wish! It's fun, it's silly, but it's not really that important.

Hope, though, is deeper than a wish. It's not hung up on specifics, and it tends to address greater concerns. We hope that our families will be safe and healthy. We hope that our children and grandchildren will have opportunities to learn and grow. We hope that our troops will come home from Iraq and that there will be peace in the Middle East. We hope that

we'll find cures for diseases. We hope for the day when no one will go to bed hungry. What all these examples have in common is that they are all hopes that *things will get better*.

But that's the rub, isn't it? Things do not always get better. We all have had hopes that were disappointed. It's worse than just a wish that doesn't come true. When hope is disappointed, a dream dies. Our ability to believe, to have faith, to trust, is shaken. So we learn to protect ourselves against that pain. If it happens enough times we can become cynical. Cynicism says that things will only get worse. We still hope a bit, but we tell ourselves we're just being realistic: things don't get better; they just get worse.

There's another, less negative approach to prevent disappointed hope, and that's contentment. Satisfaction with the way things are. *Qué sera, sera*, what will be, will be. Sometimes good things happen, sometimes bad things, but it's all part of the circle of life, and we should just accept what comes. Now, there's a lot to be said for contentment, the ability to find peace with any situation. Even Jesus talks about it: why worry about tomorrow? Tomorrow will take care of itself.

But contentment isn't what God gives us at Christmas. The angels don't proclaim the *status quo*: "Six o'clock and all's well!" No, they come singing, "Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy!" What God offers us at Christmas is hope. God tells us, "It really will get better!" Good news! The question for us is, are we ready to receive it? Are we even capable of believing it anymore?

Herod was a cynic. He thought things would get worse, so he committed an unspeakable crime, the murder of all male children under the age of two. What if the shepherds had been buffered by contentment, passive and stationary? The angels show up singing, and the shepherds say, "Cool show! Who brought the coffee?" Or the Magi, seeing a new star and merely make a note of it in their logs before turning to study the planets once more. No, they had hope, and the difference is that hope moved them to action. Action in which the outcome was not certain, action in which there was some risk. Moving your flock of sheep in the dead of night? Setting out to follow a star to who knows where? They let themselves be disturbed, they set themselves up for potential disappointment, but it was worth it because of what they hoped to find. Nothing specific, nothing certain, but whatever it was, it would be wonderful, fantastic, life-changing. Sure, the angels told them they'd find a baby, but so what? We've all seen babies. The shepherds and the Magi weren't mere sightseers. They were prodded on by the deep dreams in their hearts, their faith that not only would things get better, they would be wonderful.

And what about us today, having had two thousand years to get cynical again? Do we even dare to hope in those old promises anymore? Advent invites us to dare it. Advent reminds us of what it is that we really want for Christmas, the dreams we have long buried. But we must prepare ourselves to receive this hope. To do that, we must let go of our cynicism. That's hard to do in a society that seems to thrive on it. We need to let go of that protective buffer of cynicism and dare to let ourselves dream again. To dream, and also to trust once more. We have to step out of our contentment, which is just detachment masquerading as a virtue. Let go of our willingness to let the world just slide on past us for better or for worse. We need to get off our backsides and move, like those shepherds, like the Magi. Step out, take the risk, be willing to be caught up in the power of a dream once more.

To do all that, we need to re-harness the power of our imaginations. Maybe we should start wishing on stars again, just to remember what it's like, that sense that anything is possible. What do you hope for? What is your grown-up Christmas list? Imagine it, think about it, dream of it. And don't let yourself throw up cynical barriers or pillows of contentment. Just

pretend that it might really happen, and then see what feelings that arouses in you, what ideas it gives you, what energy fills your veins. Can you feel the excitement once more?