

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
December 1, 2019
Theme: Are We There Yet? Peace
Title: Choosing a Journey of Peace
Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

This is the season for Hallmark Christmas movies, and I watch a fairly good number of them. One of the movies, called “Welcome to Christmas” is about Christmas in a town called Christmas. Near the end of the movie one of the lead characters makes this statement. “Christmas is that feeling you get when you decorate the tree with people you love. It’s baking cookies. It’s handmade ornaments. Christmas is about home and family.” Then she presents the town with a new sign and a new slogan: “Christmas means home all year round.”ⁱ

I have to respectfully disagree with her. Christmas is so much more than that. We seem to have two different Christmas holidays and celebrations. There is the secular, cultural one that focuses on Santa, gifts, perfect decorations and so forth. There is the other original celebration of Christmas, of Christ’s birth and what that means in our lives. The challenge, for me, is balancing the two and loving both of them.

While we are running around crazily preparing for the cultural holiday, our preparations in the church are different. Beginning today, we are in the season of preparation – called Advent.

The four Advent banners hanging here in our sanctuary remind us of some of the key actions of Advent. Advent is a time when we **watch** what is happening around us and within us. It is a time when we **prepare** for what God is doing in our lives and in our world and prepare to be partners with God. It is a time when we **rejoice** that God is present with us and can

and does meet our deepest needs. It is a time when we **behold** with wonder that God is love and that God acts in ways that sometimes we cannot even begin to imagine.

There is an Advent study called “Almost Christmas” that is based on a sermon by John Wesley called “Almost Christian”. His sermon really has nothing to do with Christmas but challenges us on how we can live good lives, do good things, but until we allow Jesus to guide our lives, to be the center, the reason or motivator for what we do and how we live, we are really only “Almost Christian”. Not quite there yet.

The point of the study is that while we light candles during Advent for Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love – when we talk about those – we are also generally talking about an “almost peace, almost hope, almost joy, and almost love”. The study encourages us to get to the place where we experience what they call an “Altogether Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love.”

During our worship time, this Advent, we are focusing on something similar. We are on a Journey to Christmas and on a journey to experience and really know peace, hope, joy, and love as Christ describes them and wants us to know them. So, we ask, along with the General Board of Discipleship Advent worship theme:ⁱⁱ “Are We There Yet?” Have we come to the point of experiencing and truly knowing Peace, hope, joy, trust, and love?

I read an article this week in which the author Sarah Blessey asks, “Does Advent even matter when the world is on fire?” She noted the many things happening around us – Brexit, detention camps, protests in Hong Kong, impeachment hearings, and personal problems with health, employment, deaths, just to name a few and answers her own question of whether or not Advent does matter. She says, “But here’s the thing: We

enter into Advent precisely because we are paying attention... It's because everything hurts that we prepare for Advent. ... Advent matters, because it's our way of keeping our eyes and our hearts and our arms all wide open even in the midst of our grief and longing."ⁱⁱⁱ

Advent is a time of looking not only at the now, but also looking at the future. The "Almost Christmas" study says that Advent moments are moments when we see the "abundant possibilities for the future without having the whole story in front of us."^{iv}

"Advent is about willingly engaging in generative and regenerative work. Advent is a fresh start and a season of revisioning what could happen. And Advent is a willingness to look into the future and be willing to embrace the irrational as the way of love. In the Advent narrative, God uses normal people in very unexpected, irrational ways."^v

When we celebrate Communion, we affirm that "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." In that, we are referring to the hope that just as Christ came once to us as a baby, Christ will return at some unknown time to complete what he began. The catch is that we humans have taken this idea and often made it into something that sounds really scary. The Gospel lesson is one of those that has been used in this way. The very popular Left Behind^{vi} series not long ago emphasized this fear and expanded it with a whole series of stories that, in my opinion were great fiction but that also capitalized on this fear masquerading as truth.

I think that what the Gospel is telling us is to pay attention to what is going on around us. Like Sarah Blessey wrote, "We enter into Advent precisely because we are paying attention." Many of the things we do are things that need to be done as part of our daily lives. They are important

and Jesus isn't trying to give us a "to-do list" but rather encouraging us to have a "pay-attention list."^{vii}

The Discipleship website describes it this way, "Our Gospel text from Matthew talks about those who don't even know there is a journey going on. They are just there, doing their thing not even noticing that plans are being made, that reservations are in place, travel snacks have been purchased. They're too busy to pay attention, too focused on the tasks at hand to notice that there is movement, that the keys are being jangled, that the car is pulling out."^{viii}

What are we supposed to pay attention to? That's where the reading from Isaiah comes in. It is "a vision, a dream, a glance into the unreality of what isn't in the midst of what really is." Isaiah talks about "in the days to come"; something in the future. We can use Isaiah's vision for peace as a guide, so that we can "make the choice to journey toward the realization of a dream that could change how we live in the world of today."

It's a long journey, but one worth taking. Remember the times you have been on a very long car ride. When you see the first sign for your destination typically two things happen. First, there is some excitement because we realize that we are getting closer with each mile – and now close enough for our destination to be on a road sign.

Of course, there are exceptions. There is a sign in Bisop, California on Route 6 East, which used to be the longest road in the United States, that says "Provincetown, MA 3205 miles."^{ix} You probably wouldn't get too excited about seeing that one, even if you were starting a trip to Provincetown. But even when we do get excited about seeing a sign for our destination, there is also a reminder that we are not there yet. That we still have a long way to go.^x

That can be the way we feel when we think about peace. We hear the angels' words to the shepherds in the field of Bethlehem, "Peace on earth," and we know not only how far we are from that peace but how far even Bethlehem is from peace today.

We know that peace is about more than the absence of war. In Jesus' day, the world was experiencing what we know as the Pax Romana – the Roman peace. It was a time when the world seemed safe enough for people to be able to travel and live without fear of war. But while there was an absence of war, the climate and lives of people was far from peaceful. Peace was maintained by the iron ruling of Rome.

There are times in our own lives when we may feel anything but peace within ourselves. We have conflicts with others. We feel unsettled or afraid of the future. But all too often we pretend that all is well. We put on a good face to convince ourselves and others that things are better than they are.

The "Almost Christmas" study points out that none of the characters in the Christmas birth narrative had perfect trouble-free lives. Zechariah was startled and overcome with fear when the angel appeared to him. Mary was troubled when the angel came to her. The shepherds were terrified when the angels appeared to them. In each case the message from the angel was "Do Not be afraid."

Joseph needed encouragement to hang on and to marry Mary. Herod was terrified, jealous, paranoid and determined to get rid of the baby Jesus. "The world Jesus entered was one that needed a whole lot of peace."^{xi} At the end of Jesus' life he tried to reassure his disciples and told them, "My peace I give you." (John 14:7). When the resurrected Jesus appeared to

his disciples, his first words were, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19) Jesus’ world needed a whole lot of peace – and so does ours.

The good news is that this is the same peace that Jesus gives to us today. This is the same peace that Jesus encourages to pay attention to. During this season we are called to choose the way of peace. We can begin right where we are. We can begin in our homes – in the way we treat those with whom we live. We can begin in our communities. We can begin with our on-line presence by refusing to engage in name calling, bullying, or responding in the same way to the many political comments we encounter.

We can begin to have an influence around us by calling for peacemaking in our schools and neighborhoods, in our local governments and in community priorities. “We are called to take considered stands on policy issues that can have an impact on all of us” and that also mark us a follower of the one who came, who comes, and who is to come.

During this Advent season, we can wait passively, or we can choose to journey the Advent road by walking in the paths of peace, even when we see anything but peace around us. We may feel like peace is very far away from us – like the 3,205-mile Provincetown sign – but we can also look for the signs of peace around us, the signs that peace is already here. We can find true peace in the presence of God with us. We can find real peace in the power of the Holy Spirit helping us to embody the peace that only Christ can bring.^{xii}

ⁱ Hallmark Movie “Welcome to Christmas” Jennifer Finnagan playing Madison Lane.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/are-we-there-yet/first-sunday-of-advent-year-a-planning-notes> Cited elsewhere here as GBOD

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarahbessey.substack.com Found on Facebook and reposted on my Facebook page..

^{iv} Devaga, Magrey R et al, Almost Christmas: A Wesleyan Advent Experience “Almost Love” p. 69

^v Ibid pp.69-70

^{vi} LaHaye, Tim, & Jenkins, Jerry B. Left Behind, A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days

^{vii} GBOD

viii Ibid

ix <https://travel.stackexchange.com/questions/14552/longest-distance-ordinary-road-sign>

x GBOD

xi Devaga

xii Devaga. Much of the last few paragraphs are a summary of what he writes or in some cases the words and phrases he uses in describing this.