

Discerning the Spirit's Path of Hope for Humanity
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
November 26, 2023 First Sunday of Advent
Romans 12:1-2, 13:11-12; Mark 13:28-29, 33-37

Silent Prayer of Invocation: The wisdom of the church year invites us to enter into darkness at Advent—the peaceful darkness of long winter nights, or the disturbing shadows of a violent and unjust world, or the hidden depths of our own soul. Our task is to watch and wait for the light that shines in the darkness—the light of a revolutionary way of being human coming from a humble stable in an oppressed town of Palestine. Advent calls us to discern the Spirit's path of hope through all the struggles we face, and discernment requires a contemplative, listening silence, so let us enter into that Advent quiet now as we listen to the Prelude....

Welcome: Good morning, and welcome to the United Church of Strafford on this First Sunday of Advent. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and also welcome to those of you online.

In ancient days, strangers who came to the door in midwinter were welcomed without question and given a place by the fire. It was a matter of life or death. For that night they were as one family. This church still operates by those rules of hospitality. We may not face the same struggle for survival against the natural elements, but every person who comes through these doors struggles against the elements of illness or loss or sadness or fear or a host of other cold winds in our souls.

This congregation offers sanctuary to all. Please welcome everyone warmly into our family today after the service, both in person and on Zoom, especially those you do not know and those you know are struggling, so that all may find comfort in the shelter of this loving community.

As we begin our first rituals of Advent, we remember that traditionally it is a season for waiting, expecting and preparing, for increasing spiritual practices, and for helping people in need.

The word Advent means the coming in or approach of something. Advent season anticipates the coming of Christ in three ways: his birth in the stable, his presence in every

moment, and the eventual fulfillment of his ideal on earth. What is coming is the light of the world, the hope of new life, and many of Advent's symbols and rituals have to do with bringing light and new life into our lives.

It is no coincidence that this ancient Christian celebration comes at the darkest time of the year, a season observed by other religions long before Christ. Their solstice rituals inspired ours. What we do now—bringing greens inside and lighting candles—unites us in a shared common humanity with people across the ages.

Let us sing together the first two verses of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” as we bring in the first of the greens...

Early Romans revered holly as a symbol of courage, strength and everlasting life. Early Christians revered it as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection. A legend says that holly sprang up under the footsteps of Jesus, and so it was called the Holy Tree, which became the holly.

A Mexican legend tells of a homeless girl who had no gift to lay beside the church manger on Christmas Eve. She was sitting on the church steps crying when an angel told her that any roadside weed would do as a gift because Jesus could feel her love. She brought a dusty stalk of burdock into the sanctuary and it was miraculously transformed into a radiant red poinsettia, known in Mexico ever after as the Christmas flower.

Let us sing verses three and four of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” as we bring in the holly and poinsettias...

Advent Candle Lighting: Hope

Today we begin Advent with hope. Hope is about things to come, but also in a way it is about the past. One reason we hope Christmas will be magical this year is that it has felt magical in the past. We hope that the light will shine in the darkness within and around us because we have felt the light shining in the darkness before. We hope the Spirit of Jesus will be born in our heart this year because it has been born there in the past.

We know God's grace has helped us before, but sometimes we forget and feel hopeless, and need to remind ourselves to look for it again, and to trust. So today at this candle we remind ourselves of reasons to hope.

We find promises of God's life-transforming light repeated throughout scripture. The Prophet Isaiah put it this way: "For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of the light of God into the world. With the advent of this light comes hope. Today let us hope that by welcoming the Spirit of Christ into our lives we will become like candles ourselves, full of its light, helping to bring peace, joy and love to others.

We do this praying that the Holy Spirit will help us wait patiently and be ready to welcome Christ when he comes. He may come to us through words or music, through candles or greens, through the need or the love of another person, through the giving or receiving of a gift, or just through a warm feeling deep in our heart. Let us hope and pray that we will be open to the Spirit of Christ whenever and however it comes to us.

Let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

Call to Confession –Advent is a time for facing and confessing our inner truth. Last Sunday I quoted Frederick Buechner who wrote that the essence of all he wanted to say as a novelist and a preacher was, "Listen to your life." Theologian Henri Nouwen's book on discernment says, "When we are truly listening, we come to know that God is speaking to us, pointing the way, showing the direction. We simply need to learn to keep our ears open." What we are listening for is the Spirit moving in our heart and in our life and in the world around us. Nouwen says that in the upheaval of today's world, anyone listening to their life can confess that we feel lost, so let us take a minute or so in silence to listen to the lostness of our life, and within it seek the movement of the Spirit and the flickering of its light...

Discerning the Spirit's Path of Hope for Humanity

Every Advent I return to a Hanukkah story called "The Power of Light," by the great Jewish writer, Isaac Bashevis Singer. It is like scripture, and fits the Hope Sunday of Advent perfectly, so I will begin by sharing an abridged version:

David was fourteen years old, and Rebecca, thirteen. The Nazis had bombed and burned the Warsaw ghetto and killed everyone in both their families.

“It was winter and bitter cold outside. For weeks Rebecca had not left the dark, partially collapsed cellar that was their hiding place, but every few days David would go out to search for food.... Making his way through the ruins was dangerous.... But if he and Rebecca did not want to die from hunger, he had to take the risk.”

On one of the coldest days Rebecca sat shivering in the cellar, knowing that if David did not come back, she would surely die. The Nazis watched the ghetto closely and killed any survivors they caught. Every time David went out, Rebecca knew that she might never see him again. After a long while, she heard David return. She cried out in relief and they hugged and kissed. David reported he had found a treasure—frozen potatoes, some mushrooms, some cheese, a bag of candy and a surprise.

They were ravenous, but ate just a little to make it last. Then Rebecca asked about the surprise. David said, “Rebecca, today is the first day of Hanukkah, and I found a candle and some matches!”

David said the blessing and lit the candle, and for the first time in weeks they saw each other’s faces. They were filthy and ragged and much thinner, but their eyes shone in the candlelight. They had talked about trying to escape before, but fear and the impossibility of it had held them back. Rebecca had urged David to wait. Now the light of the candle filled them both with hope. Rebecca said, “Let’s leave.”

David had formed a plan. The Nazis guarded every exit from the ghetto day and night, but he had found an entrance to a sewer not far from their cellar. It might lead them out of the ghetto. It was dangerous. They could drown or freeze to death in the dirty water, and the sewers were full of starving rats, but it was their only chance. To remain in the ghetto meant certain death.

The Hanukkah light began to sputter. They gathered their few belongings and the remaining food. It was a terrible and slow journey just getting to the sewer without being caught, but when they got down in it they found the water frozen and the rats gone. They crawled a long way, resting from time to time. Finally, they heard the sound of a streetcar overhead and knew they had made it to the other side.

Their plan was to find the Jewish partisans who were hiding in the forests beyond Warsaw. They were in danger every step of the way after leaving the sewer. One night they were in a village looking for food when they stumbled into a partisan in the dark. He took them out to their

camp. It was the last night of Hanukkah, and they played dreidel on a stump in the glow of a fully lit menorah, surrounded by that loving community.

Singer knew this story because David and Rebecca told it to him in their home in Israel one Hanukkah evening eight years later. Their young son was playing with the very dreidel from the forest.

Rebecca said, “If it had not been for that little candle David brought to our hiding place, we wouldn’t be sitting here today. That glimmer of light awakened in us a hope and strength we didn’t know we possessed.”

The story is particularly poignant this year. The children could be Israeli or Palestinian or Ukrainian or from twenty other nations that are currently at war.

People rush to take sides, but the enemy we need to oppose is humanity’s shadow side that resorts to violence. The enemy is the selfish ego that responds to threats with fearful greed and assertions of power, that has no idea what it really means to love our enemy or our neighbor as our self. The enemy is the part of the human mind that accepts one people oppressing another, that tolerates the murder of thousands of children as if war or revenge justified that hideous, totally unjustifiable act.

We could feel hopeless if it were not for the little candle stubs we find in the midst of the ruins, the lights that shine in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome. These candles show that the Spirit that created life on earth and evolved the human heart and mind is not done with humanity yet.

How could the Spirit have given up hope on creatures that write such beautiful stories, who compose and perform such gorgeous music, who struggle courageously to end the spirals of violence?

For the past four months we had services Seeking Spirit, and we found the Spirit in all the light that our neighbors poured into those services—the Cantornote musicians and Rolf and Annemieke and Emerson and Becky and Jim and Joey and Danette and Debby and Herbert and Mel and Rachel and Cesar and Mary and Mark and Nate and Nelly.

They came each week holding up their candle, lighting another step along the Spirit’s path of hope.

Advent is a journey through darkness, like Rebecca and David, toward the light of a hope that faith tells us is coming.

What is it, though, that we are moving toward?

The traditional answer is Jesus, the birth of a child called Son of God and Son of Man. But what do those titles mean?

They mean we are waiting for the birth of a whole new kind of Spirit-led human who will teach and model a way of being a whole new humanity. Jesus calls us each to be a New Human like him, filled with the same Spirit, doing the same kinds of works for a healthy, peaceful and just world.

Advent leads us to find our candle stub, and hold it up to discern our path ahead by the light of its hope. Like Rebecca and David, we need to have the courage and faith to take the next step on the Spirit's path for us, so that we may become candles ourselves whose stories inspire those around us to trust in the power of light. That is how the New Humanity will come to birth, one candle, one journey at a time. This is our hope in every Advent and every age of history, and as much as ever it is our hope today in all we face.

Let us pray together in silence, going down into the darkness within us and waiting patiently for the Spirit that is seeking us...

Haiku by Mel Goertz

Advent, the time when birds
come back to your feeder
bringing light with them.