

"THE ADVENT HOPE"

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Once again our eyes and our hearts begin to turn toward Christmas. Once again, our thoughts are centered upon the coming of Jesus - of his Advent into the world. Advent is the season of hope. At this time, we bring to mind the thrilling hopes and expectations that were in the hearts of those that we read about in the Old Testament. There was one great hope that ran like a golden thread down through the centuries preceding the coming of Jesus. It was this hope that eventually found fulfillment in the events of the New Testament. We find that the last book of the old Testament, the book of Malachi, closes with a faint hope and a dark threat. This was followed by four hundred years of tragic history. During this period of time, it was very difficult to follow the divine footsteps on the face of the earth. And yet, somehow, this one great hope managed to live on because there was behind it, a tenacious and unshakable faith in God!

When I seriously began to consider the contemporary significance of Advent, I began to draw, far too easily, comparisons between our own time and the time preceding the coming of Jesus. It's true that the last fifty years have seen a great deal of tragic history. It's equally true that at times we have had great difficulty in locating the divine footsteps on the face of the earth. As someone has pointed out to us: "Two thousand years of saying mass, and we've gotten as far as poison gas!" Or if you prefer to put it in more up to date scientific terms, "Two thousand years of Paul's Epistles, and all we have are guided missiles". It's so easy to lose sight of the divine footprints. It's so easy to lose hope!

Roswell Barnes tells of an experience that he had one summer while vacationing in the mountains. Late one afternoon while hiking through the woods, he came to a beautiful clearing. He was so taken with the beauty of the spot that he decided to sit down and rest on the soft pine needles. It was late in the afternoon, and soon the dusk began to settle. He watched the sun go down, and soon he was watching the stars appear in the sky. It was a beautiful and inspiring experience he said. He began to realize how long it had been since he had taken time to look up at the stars. His mind began to dwell on the immensity of the universe. He began to think about the great mystery of God. Later, looking back upon this experience, he remarked:

"That's the trouble with my generation. We've lost sight of the stars."

It's so easy to lose sight of the stars, especially the star of hope. It's been said that the person without hope, is the person without God, and the person without God is without hope. Hope and God! The two go together. They're part of the same life! I've never cared for that familiar beatitude of Alexander Pope's. Remember how it goes:

"Blessed is he who expects nothing for he shall never be disappointed!"

Far more wiser is this beatitude, the author of which I do not know:

"Blessed is he who expects great things from God, and attempts great things for God!"

Park Avenue Methodist Church

EIGHTY-SIXTH STREET AND PARK AVENUE
NEW YORK 28, N. Y.

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The message of Advent is the message of hope. It is the hope that someday God's kingdom of love, righteousness, and peace will be established. It is the hope that someday we will have a society that is free from crippling disease, a society that is free from war and greed, a society that is free from slums and selfishness. It is the message of which the angelic choruses sang over the Judaen hills centuries ago:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill toward men."

~~It was said of Emerson that he went about peeping into every cradle and baby carriage that he saw always looking for a Messiah. We smile at his expression of hope and expectation. There in he was wise.~~ Of old there came a baby - a baby whose life of heroic moral loveliness gave a new depth and wonder to human life. The manger-cradle refuted despair. And this brings us to the very center of the meaning of Advent. His Advent marked a turning point in history. We know very little about his birth. The events surrounding his birth are summed up in one chapter. We're given just a fleeting glimpse of him at 12. And the next 18 years of his life are told in one brief sentence from the pen of Luke. His ministry lasted about 400 days. Someone has written that:

"He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself. Yet, I am within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life."

"The trouble with my generation" remarked Roswell Barnes, "is that we have lost sight of the stars." So had those people in the dark days when the shepherds and wise men saw a new star of hope. A legend tells us that as the wisemen followed that star, it became brighter and even brighter, until at last it brought them to a cradle and to a baby. May that happen to you, too, as you start out on this First Sunday of Advent. May His Star of Hope bring you to the place where all wisemen have knelt. For there in Bethlehem, we find the only real hope for puzzling and perplexing problems, and the only star by which to guide and govern the affairs of men in the world today.

"Come, Thou long expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and Consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art.
Dear Desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart!

PRAYER: Our Father and our God, as we kneel at Thy table this morning, may we be reminded of how the wisemen knelt before the baby Jesus.

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May we come humbly, thankfully, with hearts that are at peace with all men, and with minds that are willing to be challenged by Thy truth and Thy hope. Amen

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THE ADVENT HOPE

This all brings us back to the very center - our Advent Hope, even Christ.

His Advent marked a turning-point in human history - our calendars reckon time from this event. We do not know too much about Him and His Coming. The events surrounding His birth are told in single chapter. Given a fleeting glimpse of Him at twelve; then the next eighteen years of His life are told in one brief sentence from pen of Luke. His public ministry is estimated at 400 days. We have in the gospel accounts a record of only about 40 separate days. But the impact of Jesus upon history is out of all proportion to the brevity of the account.

Testimonies of three distinguished scholars; Lecky, Renan, Brightman. And all that is implicit in His Coming.

"The trouble with my generation" says Roswell Barnes, "is that we have lost the stars". So had the people in those days when shepherds and wise men saw a new star of hope. Legend tells that as the wise men followed that star, it became brighter and ever brighter, until at last it brought them to a cradle and a babe. May that happen to us, starting out this First Sunday in Advent - may the star bring us to the place where all wise men will have to come - to a Babe in Bethlehem.

For in that Babe is the only Hope of our lives and of the world

"THE ADVENT HOPE"

^{Yesterday}
Today First Sunday in Advent. Eyes and hearts begin to turn toward Christmas and thoughts begin to focus around coming of Jesus - His Advent into the world. So days of homecoming will soon be here; and fires will be lighted upon the hearth and candles will burn brightly in many windows.

Advent is season of hope. The most noticeable fact relative to pagan world into which He came, was the fact that hopes were dead - gone out like so many sputtering candles in the wind.

And the days in which we live are comparable to those far-off pagan days. Where is there any hope today? "Our spirits grow gray before our hairs" -Charles Lamb. Old securities no longer secure. Roswell Barnes tells of vacation experience in the mountains. Stretches out on grass. Day fades into dusk; dusk blends into darkness. Stars began to appear. Didn't notice them at first. Awed by power and mystery of God and by vastness of time and space. Then remembered he hadn't seen stars for years. "That's the trouble with my generation - we've lost the stars".

And in days like these it's easy to lose the stars - particularly star of hope.

WHAT IS HOPE? A great word fallen into bad company. Become debased in meaning. Used today merely to indicate wishful thinking - "I hope the weather will clear"; "I hope you'll have a nice time". Really is a great word; strong and virile, dynamic. Says Paul, "We are saved by hope". Makes it a part of great trilogy - faith, hope, love. Again, Paul

speaks; "Having no hope and without God in the world". A man without hope is without God; and a man without God is without hope.

Hope can be defined as "A firm expectation of promised good"; "Belief in future". But we are cynical today; fatalistic. Have little faith in human nature and no hope of the future. Two world wars in our lifetime and preparation for another. Christianity here for twenty centuries and where are we? "Two thousand years of saying Mass; and got as far as poisoned gas" -Hardy.

But Advent Message is one of hope - a hope that God's Kingdom will be established. Kingdom of love and goodwill. Society free from crippling poverty, free from viciousness, free from slums, free from disease, free from war. The kind of society spoken of by angelic messengers over Judean hills long ago - "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill to men".

"That will never come as long as men are cruel and selfish". True! But I pin my hope to the purpose of a loving God to redeem mankind - whose purpose it is to make this world into His Kingdom of love and service, and beauty. As a Christian I have a hope - a firm expectation of promised good.

REASONS AND BASIS FOR SUCH HOPE On what grounds dare we make such assertions? I have my reasons. First:

Man has moved forward, say what you will. 50,000 burned to death as heretics in sixteenth century. As flames leaped high small children held high to enjoy the sight. In New York City in 1816 more than 11,000 were imprisoned for debts not exceeding \$25.00.

Hundred years ago slavery not thought unjust. Believed some born to be masters and

"That much quoted editorial in "Fortune" magazine made the statement that present-day Christianity has turned away from the deep spiritual values which are basic to civilization and has started pinning its faith to the surface of life - paraphernalia, machinery, profits, tools, comforts - and it's the surface that has let us down. 'If you're a taxpayer you have the right to be disillusioned because you've lost your money. If you're a statesman, you have a right to be disillusioned, because you've failed to bring any tangible order out of chaos. But if you're a Christian, you've no right at all. Your grounds are spiritual grounds'"

some to obey. Read your Phyllis Bentley as she describes the stunting effect of the factory system of England. Children of ten years of age working twelve hours a day. Say what you will; the modern conscience has become more sensitive. We have made gains. We are repelled by atrocities; we are aware of our sins. Conscience has become more christian and more sensitive.

Second: I am hopeful because life is based on hope. In physical life there is more life than death else race would have perished long ago. More health than disease. More goodness than evil otherwise evil would have won the battle and dominated spirits of men long ago. *"Here I am, alive!"*

Goodness is more contagious than evil. There is more kindness in world than malignant hatred. Fundamentally, men demand beauty, truth, goodness. These are normal desires. Men demand these, and in the long run will have these. Such is my hope.

Thirdly: I am hopeful because Christian faith is based on spiritual values. It is anchored to world of unseen. Was it not Huxley who said the trouble with modern man is that "he has lost his invisible means of support". Noted French artist always began his paintings by putting sky in first. Then pool imaged the heavens; and earth below was seen in light of heavens above. And that is why the Christian has a right to his hopes - he is able to see things in the light of the eternal - against the background of eternity. Paints the sky in first "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal...?" Hopes are anchored in world of things unseen. Quotation from "Fortune".

William H. Lecky, historian and philosopher and also a rationalist, said that the simple record of the three short years of Jesus' active life has done more to regenerate and to soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and all the exhortations of moralists.

Ernest Renan, noted French scholar who spent several years training for Catholic priesthood but ended in skepticism. Of the Man on the Cross he says, "Thou art destined to become the cornerstone of humanity in such wise, that to tear Thy Name from this world would be to shake it to its foundations. Whatever may be the unexpected phenomenon of the future, Jesus will not be surpassed. His worship will constantly renew its youth, the tale of His life will cause ceaseless tears, His sufferings will soften the best hearts; all the ages will proclaim that, among the sons of men, there is none born who is greater than Jesus".

Edgar Brightman of Boston University has said, "A Being who, nineteen hundred years after His death, can cause a civilization to question its own foundations, is no insignificant Jewish carpenter. He is a figure of world importance".

"THE ADVENT HOPE"

INTRODUCTION

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and once again our hearts begin to turn toward Christmas and the coming of Jesus into the world. The message of the Advent season is one of hope, one of expectation. At this time each year, we bring to mind the thrilling hopes that were in the hearts of those we read about in the pages of the Old Testament. They were looking for a Messiah; this one great hope ran like a golden thread down through the centuries preceding the coming of Jesus. It was this hope that Isaiah summed up so beautifully in those words sung by the choir only moments ago:

"For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
And a highway shall be there, and it shall be
called the way of Holiness....
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and
come to Zion with singing, with everlasting
joy upon their heads;
They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow
and sighing shall flee away...."

It was this hope, of course, that eventually found fulfillment in the events recorded for us on the pages of the New Testament.

We find that the last book of the Old Testament, the Book of Malachi, closes with a faint hope and a dark threat. This was followed by four hundred years of tragic history during which time it was difficult for many people to find any trace of any divine foot-prints on the face of the earth. Yet, somehow, this one great hope managed to live on because it was undergirded by a tenacious and unshakeable faith in God.

DRAWING COMPARISONS

When one begins to consider the contemporary significance of Advent, one finds it quite easy to draw comparisons between our own time and the time preceding the coming of Jesus. This century has seen a great deal of tragic history, and there have been times when we have found it difficult to find any trace of any divine foot-prints on the face of the earth.

One night, not long ago, a little boy called out to his mother from his bed-room and said: "Mommy, won't you leave the hall light on?" "No David, you don't need any light; you're supposed to be going to sleep" "But mommy I can't see" he protested, "the darkness gets in the way". The darkness gets in the way. That's the way it so often is in the adult world. The darkness of human sin and selfishness and suffering, the darkness of disease, the darkness of war - the darkness gets in the way. Discouragement and despair descend upon us. We lose hope. We lose sight of the divine foot-prints on the face of the earth.

Dr. Sockman tells of an experience that he had one summer while vacationing in the mountains. Late one afternoon, while

hiking through the woods, he came to a beautiful clearing. He was so taken with the beauty of the spot that he decided to sit down and rest on the soft pine needles. It was late in the afternoon, and soon the dusk began to settle. He watched the sun go down, and soon he was watching the stars come out. He began to realize how long it had been since he had taken time to look up at the stars. His mind began to dwell on the immensity of the universe. He began to meditate on the great mystery of God. And later on, in looking back on this experience, he made this simple observation: "The trouble with our generation - with our time - is that we have lost sight of the stars."

It's easy to lose sight of the stars, especially this star of hope. The person without hope is the person without God, and the person without God is the person without hope. Hope and God - the two go together. They're part of the same life.

The message of this Advent is the message of hope. It is a hope that rests on a tenacious and unshakeable faith in God who broke into the world at a point in history and revealed his nature to us in the life of a particular person. And because of this event, we can take hope. We have the hope that one day love and peace and righteousness will be firmly established. We have the hope that one day we shall have a society free from crippling disease, from war, from greed, from slums and selfishness. This is our hope as Christians because of what happened long ago.

CLOSING When Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt died last month, there were many tributes to her from all over the world. The most eloquent of all the tributes paid to her came, we are not surprised, from Adlai Stevenson. He spoke of her with the affection of a friend, and then went on to say this: "She would rather light candles than curse the darkness"

And so let me bring it all together here at the end by saying this: yes, there are times when the darkness gets in the way, times when we lose sight of the stars, but even then we need not fear nor curse the darkness - because long ago God lit a candle, and what a candle it was - and the light from that candle, the light from that life across the centuries has dispelled the darkness, and the light from that life offers us the only real and lasting hope for the darkness that hovers over mankind today.

LET US PRAY:

As we come to thy table this morning, Our Father, may we come quietly and reverently mindful of the life that these moments bring to mind. We remember his love, his compassion, his understanding, his great trust in Thee.

And as we kneel at his table, at this place where the wisemen of all ages have knelt, may something of his spirit and his life flow into our lives that we may depart from place strengthened and spiritually renewed.

"Come, Thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free.
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's Strngth and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart."