

“The Hopes and Fears of All the Years ...”

Advent ... the coming, or the arrival (from Latin *adventus* : arrival).

Advent ... waiting and watching and hoping.

Advent ... Christmas is almost here but not quite yet. We're waiting a little longer.

Advent ... hopes and fears, all mixed up together.

This season of Advent is like a kind of cosmic symbol. Like all symbols it points to something outside of itself. Advent, the four weeks or so before Christmas, is time's arrow pointing outside itself to Christmas, and pointing us that direction too. In that way, it's much like the season of Lent that precedes Easter. Both seasons invite us into activity and a mind-set of preparing, proclaiming, anticipating and eventually welcoming. That's why for many years the church colour for Advent and Lent was the same – purple. Many Advent wreaths still use purple candles, although we at Knox, along with many churches today, use blue Advent candles now, to separate the anticipatory spiritual tone of Advent from the more penitential tone of Lent.

Through the days and weeks of Advent we're waiting – and hoping. For what?

“For the birth of Jesus – Christmas!”, you say to answer that seemingly obvious question. Really? Didn't the birth of Jesus happen a long time ago? Say ... a couple of thousand years ago or so? So what am I waiting for **now**? What might we all be waiting for – in this 21st century Advent?

What I'm waiting and hoping for is the opening of my heart more fully to the real impact of Jesus' life and ministry, and the mystery we call resurrection. I'm waiting to connect once again with my calling and identity as a Christian – the calling to strive for peace, justice and right relationships in my own living, and in the world in which I live. I'm waiting to renew for myself – and in myself – that sense of direction and purpose that leads me to name myself a follower of Jesus. I'm waiting for the truth of those wonderful nativity stories to take fire once more in my mind and spirit, regardless of whatever the historical facts might have been. I'm waiting for Jesus to come that way. I'm waiting – and hoping – for that Christmas. I think people have been hoping for that Christmas for many, many years.

If that's my hope (and perhaps yours too?), then what might be the fears?

In that ever-humbling truth that I am no more and no better than anyone else, I have to admit that deep down I fear that it won't happen. You see, I need it to happen! I need that re-awakening and opening of my spirit – that kind of God-entering-my-world experience of Christmas. I fear that nothing else might be enough for me to keep on trying to be more fully human, more fully alive, more deeply engaged in this life-journey of yearning and striving toward real discipleship. I fear that I won't be strong enough, or courageous enough, or committed enough to keep going down that road, without experiencing the Christmas for which I hope. The birth of an infant Jesus in the cosmic Christmas-story, if I've let myself become truly ready, is a powerful moment of renewal for me.

When the Christmas for which I wait and hope does indeed happen – in me ... and for me ... and to me – all those fears get swept aside one more time. When I share that moment with others for whom it happens too, then our spirits sing and dance together. Together we are assured one more time that we really can trust God and rest in grace, that we really are both blessed and blessings, that we really are filled with enough love to go ahead and love ourselves and others.

You've figured out by now that this kind of Christmas may not be limited to once a year. I hope not. This kind of Christmas – the only kind of Christmas that makes sense to me through the Advent season – could happen anytime.

Still, the calendar-Christmas remains particularly important. It's one time when our whole culture shares at least something of that Advent hope. Sure, it's imperfect and misdirected and even

subverted by other values, but that hope flickers and flashes among the tinsel and tunes, the hustle and bustle, the commerce and the craziness. At the very least, Advent offers a once-a-year chance to look inside ourselves long enough, deeply enough and truthfully enough to become more ready than ever to welcome a Christmas renewal of spirit and life.

May your fears drift away with the snows of the season, and your hopes take root in your spirit. Come, O come Emmanuel! Merry Christmas!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'B. M.' or similar, written in a cursive style.