

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for November 28, 2010 ~ First Sunday of Advent
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

It's Advent, the time when Christians prepare their lives afresh for the news of the greatest gift the world has ever received – Love Divine, selfless, unconditional Love, Love manifested in a vulnerable infant lying on a bed of straw in a stable. His name, Jesus, means “God will save his people.”

Advent begins on a note of expectation, longing, and hope. The color blue, which we are now using during this season, has long been associated with that hope “which springs eternal in the human breast.” We hope because the One who came so long ago has promised to return and those who believe in him look forward to his return. How does he come? I don't know, exactly. When does he come? Even Jesus refused to answer that question, other than to say, “only the Father knows.” With such uncertainties, it is natural for people to want to know how on earth we're supposed to express this hope of the Lord's coming. After all, we are not like those first century Christians. We are busy people. We run on schedules. Why can't the Messiah accommodate us by getting on our calendars.

I stand before you this morning as a man who has been broken into many pieces through my wrestling with this question. I am exposed to the same daily news as you. Like you, I know how desperately our world needs messengers of hope. Sometimes I awaken in the night asking, “is there any hope? And, if there is, how can it be expressed?” Always, I come around to these two answers: The hope that is Christ is coming to us and we express this hope when we live our lives as if we truly believe this news to be true. It is in that light that this morning's reading from the Letter to the Romans (Rom. 13:11-14) points us in the right direction for hope-filled living.

It helps us see that we can express the hope by walking in the light which the Lord gives us.

That means we must dream of and hope for a better time to come, but our task does not end there. Equally important, we must flesh out that dream in our life together in pursuit of peace and justice for all humanity. How can we possibly express this hope, in the flesh, for the world? One way is to remember that we have to live in God's light and avoid the temptation to operate in the darkness.

The Letter to the Romans tells us that if we want to do battle with the forces of darkness we have to take up the weapons for fighting in the light, taking positive action on behalf of those around us. That adds up to love. Loving God and one another are the primary obligations we have as children of God. If you love someone, says the writer, you will never do that person wrong.

That's a very tall order. We say, “it's not easy to love like that. We're only human. We have needs and rights and points to make and positions to defend, etc., etc.” That's all true. But being human is an opportunity, not an excuse. And, we are under no obligation to concentrate on satisfying our personal desires, particularly if we do so at someone else's expense. We are called to love with a love like our Lord's. St. Paul describes this love as a love that is patient and kind, has a lasting quality, and is always ready to forgive. This kind of love doesn't keep score. Ultimately, this love alone survives as the ideal human quality, surpassing even faith and hope. Therefore, if we want to express the greatest hope there is, we have to get out into the place where the light of God shines, flooding our lives with the warmth of a love that never fails and always gives. For the Love that gives such hope is not from us. It comes to us as a gift, which we are to give to others with the same extravagance with which it has been given to us.

When we've decided to live our lives this way, we can look forward to the day when the Messiah comes again.

Clarence Hall, a clergyman who served as a senior editor for *The Reader's Digest* for many years, wrote an article for that publication about a trip he made to the Holy Land. It was an inspirational Easter piece that centered on his attendance at the sunrise service held at the Garden Tomb on Easter morning. Clarence Hall related that he was restless and could not sleep the night before that service. He turned to his Arab guide who was sharing a room with him and asked if the night would ever pass. He writes, "Abdul's face in the candlelight rebuked me. 'Never fear, my friend. The day will come. You can't hold back the dawn.'"

In Moffatt's translation of the first chapter of Luke, there is an unusual word that is applied to Jesus. Instead of "Dayspring" as used in the KJV, or "First Light of Heaven" as rendered by J.B. Phillips, or "the Morning Star from Heaven" as in the NEB. Moffatt describes Jesus as the "Dawn."

The dawn is the beginning of a new day with its corollaries of beauty and power revealing itself to the world around us. The old day has gone and has been lost in the night. A new beauty unfolds and a new power makes itself felt. That's something to look forward to, isn't it? It's something to hope for. As "the Dawn" Jesus came to give us what we seem to need most – illumination and direction, light in the darkness, and direction into the paths of peace.

So, when does he come? Maybe he comes moment by moment, revealing himself in the pain and heartbreak and loneliness of life or in its joys and pleasures. Maybe he appears in the face of a starving child or a bleeding soldier. Or maybe he comes on a descending cloud in the end time. Maybe he comes in all these ways and more. But he comes! Always at the *kairos*, the right time.

He breaks into our lives from the future as well as from the past. When we walk as children of light and hope, we will surely recognize him when he comes and we will greet him with the ancient cry, "*Maranatha* – Come, Lord Jesus. We are at our posts ready and watching for you!"

Advent is a gift from God to the world to help us get ready and stay that way, ready to receive the news of his coming in the flesh of a baby, ready to receive him when he breaks into our lives at any moment, ready to greet him when he comes at the end of things – the end of our patience, the end of our resources, the end of our rope, the end of our life, the end of time.

When I think of what Advent is supposed to do for us, I am always reminded of that old story about Chanticleer, the rooster. This rooster was a vain sort of bird who prided himself in his accomplishments. Most of all, he congratulated himself for the sunrise, for, as anyone could plainly observe, his crowing every morning caused the sun to appear on the horizon. Invariably, this was so. One morning, however, Chanticleer overslept. When he awoke he was surprised and chagrined. There was the sun, high in the sky, and it had gotten there without one bit of help from him. Thinking things over, this rooster realized that he could not honestly take credit for the beauty of each day. But there was something else he could do. Said Chanticleer, "If by my crowing I cannot bring in the dawn, then by my crowing I can celebrate its coming."

Our lives and our actions do not bring God down to us. We are not in control either of his coming in the Incarnation or his appearing again in the present or in the future. But our lives can celebrate the passing of the night and the hope of the dawn. May all our crowing foster hope, for we are called and empowered to live in the light so we can be bearers of hope in word and in deed. That is the true adventure of Advent!