



This headline: America finds a new Thanksgiving tradition: retailers experience fights among consumers vying for that special bargain- that “got to have” item. And videos of the fights, stabbings and arrests are tweeted around the world. One woman even brought a taser with her to

make sure she got that “must have” item. How incredibly sad and how many questions this raises about our values and our understanding of what truly matters.

Too often and for too many of us, this is a season of more vs. less. A season of choices. A season supposedly with an emphasis on family and friends, hope and celebration. How many of us get to December 26<sup>th</sup> and are simply exhausted?

Why do we do this to ourselves: calendars too full for us to relax and enjoy each other? Next year we’ll do less, we think – but when next year comes, it is even more frenetic. Why is it so hard to let go and let God enter our lives? We are so busy that God’s voice is drowned out by that one more gift, one more party, one more card, one more..., one more..., one more...

What if we spent less, gave more and worshipped fully?<sup>1</sup> What might change in your life if you could be really present to your son or daughter, your mother or father, your friends that you see once a year when they return to be with their parents or family in Crawfordsville? It might be scary to be that vulnerable. It doesn’t take money to give or to receive love. It does take time and intentionality. When we separate money and love, we become free to be more fully who God wants us to be.

Rick McKinley reminds us that “our hearts are formed by what we worship. Excitement, anticipation, hope - each of these emotions wells around the object of our dearest affection. We spend our time and energy on what matters most to us. What do we worship during Advent? ‘Jesus’ is the right answer, of course, but is it the truthful answer?”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rick McKinley, Chris Seay and Greg Holder. Advent Conspiracy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> Id at 32.

What's the best Christmas present you ever received? What's the best memory of Christmas that you have? Was it really that hot new toy? Or was it time around the table or visiting with friends? Was it the handmade picture from your child? Perhaps it was simply being together on Christmas Eve singing the hymns and lighting the candles.

Advent comes from the Latin word "adventus" meaning coming, anticipation, hope. From darkness to light. We read in the Gospel of John: light came into the world and the darkness did not overcome it. Think about the impact of a small light, like flashlight in the dark. A small beam but it lights our way so we do not stumble.

Paul's pleas to put on "the armor of light" is not a militaristic reference but rather a reminder that we are surrounded, protected and warmed by God's love – God's light. We are made strong by God's love. Paul in Romans implores those reading or hearing his letter to remember that "Now is the time" and we need to "awake from sleep"

Why is Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech so meaningful? Perhaps because it calls us to be better than we often are. Perhaps because it aligns with what we understand God's dream for us is all about. Dr. King said: "But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we've come to cash this check..."

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith ..."

These words speak to our common human condition. These words are largely from the Prophet Isaiah- a vision of what is possible if we follow God.

Or consider Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It too is something that is so deeply rooted in being an American. We just celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary a few weeks ago. It is still as poignant and moving as ever – even though fewer of us memorize it or can recite it

God has a dream for humanity and for all creation. Advent is a time for us to reconnect with our part and our responsibility in that dream. We are to be active, not passive, in this process. Faithfulness means we act, not simply react

The “Advent Conspiracy” movement calls for us to “worship more” this first week of Advent. It urges us to understand the secular advertising to buy more and more whether you need it or not for what it is. Rick McKinley and the other founders of this movement ask us to distinguish between needs and wants. We do that with REINdear but do we do it with ourselves? Kairos v. chromos: God’s time vs. clock time. We need to stop and think more about God’s time and not just time as told on our watches or our cell phones. We need to stop thinking so much about the relentless movement from one minute to the next that keeps us wound up and tired out.

The Rev. Mary Frances Schjonberg <sup>3</sup> says “And then there’s God’s time. It’s all contained within the circle of the Advent wreath, the wreath with the first candle lit this morning. It’s the beginning of Advent, the beginning of the church year, that big wheel of time that every year turns us from the waiting of Advent to the joy of Christmas, to the waiting of Lent to the joy of Easter, to the waiting of Eastertide to the joy of Pentecost, to the joy of life in ordinary time and back again.

So here is the span of God’s time we enter this morning. This candle marks the beginning of the time we will spend with the prophet Isaiah, that prophet from the Hebrew Scriptures known and trusted and quoted by the writers of the New Testament.

The light of this candle infuses today’s readings. Isaiah implores his listeners to walk in the light of the Lord into the kingdom where people do not learn how to make war but instead turn their energies toward cultivating the earth and not destroying it.

Paul echoes Isaiah’s vision when he urges his listeners to wake up, to leave the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light. Paul also echoes what he had heard that Jesus said to his disciples, the words that Matthew attributes to him: “Keep awake therefore.”

Next Sunday we will light the first and the second candles, and Isaiah will remind us what happens in the light: growth, a green shoot from a dead stump. Paul will

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<sup>3</sup> <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2013/11/15/1-advent-a-2013/> (Nov. 30 2103)

Isaiah 2:1-5; Ps. 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

remind us of Isaiah's prediction about that dead stump of David's line bearing new fruit in the person of Jesus. John the Baptist, the one Isaiah predicted would come, will appear in the blinding sunlight of the desert, telling us to prepare the way for the one who will use water and fire to make us his own.

On the third Sunday when we light three candles, Isaiah will tell us about deserts that bloom, the blind who see and the lame who leap. James will remind us in his letter that it takes time for the earth to bloom. He will use the prophets as examples of those who waited patiently for their faith to bear fruit.

Jesus will confirm John the Baptist's suspicions about him: indeed, he is the one whom Isaiah predicted. Through him the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the people hear the good news of the coming of the kingdom.

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, four candles will burn in this wheel and the promises will soon be fulfilled. Isaiah will tell us about a young woman who will give birth to a son and name him Immanuel, "God with us." Matthew will set Jesus' birth to Mary and Joseph in the light of Isaiah's prediction. Paul will tell the Romans that Jesus fulfills everything the prophets promised us. ... And so the circle of Advent time comes around again. But Advent is not a time when we go through the motions of remembering a story whose ending we already know. It's worth remembering that we begin our journey around this wheel this morning with Jesus' own prediction of how he will come to us again.

Advent is about Jesus coming once and promising to come again. This time of Advent is about the light shining in the darkness but not obliterating the darkness. It is about the kingdom having already come near to us but not yet having been fulfilled."

Yes, some of you find the music dreary. Yes, some of you can't wait to get out and shop. You see Advent as an obstacle that has to be endured to get to Christmas. Perhaps, though, entering into the reflective spirit of Advent would give us a deeper appreciation when Christmas Day does arrive.

Perhaps permitting ourselves to have some quiet time to consider what we truly value will help us live our lives more congruently and when December 26<sup>th</sup> arrives we may find that we are not quite as exhausted as in year's past.

For many of us, family traditions are changing. A parent may no longer be living or may not longer be willing or able to travel to be with us. We may have some hard choices to make about how we reshape our family traditions to meet new realities. Some quiet and reflective time during the season of Advent when we consider what Jesus came to be and to do might help us let go of past traditions which are no longer sustainable and find joy in new traditions that bring joy in different ways.

Love is central to this season of Advent. Love is central to relationship with God and with each other. Love is a gift of the Spirit and our response to the Holy Spirit.

But to know that love requires stopping the frenzied shopping and the continuous rounds of parties and commitments. Love needs time and space to flower most fully. What's needed in this season of Advent is a change of heart.

A refocusing upon God and upon neighbor. A preparation so that on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day we can say from the bottom of our heart: Welcome, Jesus!  
**Amen.**