

Newsletter Reflection for December 2018

This month is the last month in the calendar year. At the same time it represents the beginning of the church year as we enter the season of Advent on December 2nd. Those who attend church while spending the interval until the 25th anticipating the arrival of the promised Savior during worship will, most of the time outside of that specified time tend to view the Advent Season through the lens of past events-- primarily the birth of that Jewish boy in Bethlehem who grew up among us and changed the course of history. That the incarnation event occurred alone is cause to celebrate. Yet for many reasons, because we believe that Jesus' presence in the world was not just a onetime historical event the season is even more meaningful. In the middle of the calendar year we rejoice in the way God's actions through Christ have offered to us the gift of a love we cannot understand: a gift so amazing that it carries power which transforms our lives in the here and now. The season of Advent also celebrates the hope resident in the promise of Christ that he will come again. Too often we seem to get caught up in the ways the world views this season—not as a profound statement about God's love and a hope given for all—but as a retail opportunity. The retail world began the "Christmas" season before the signs of Halloween and Thanksgiving had come. Much to my dismay sales pitches have already begun to dominate commercial space on TV and in other media. I am not a coffee lover and do not patronize Starbucks but still remember the commotion created about their "holiday" red cup in 2016. For some reason their use of a "red" cup during the Christmas season (no wording on it at all) instead of their usual white cup was taken up as being offensive to some in the faith community. My son found all that commotion confusing and disturbing and he spoke from his pulpit about it. The sermon title was the *Intersection of the Profound and the Inane*. The day the media storm broke about the "red" cup, he was in his study and in possession of one of those cups which contained his morning coffee (whose color change he had not even noticed until Facebook posts started rapidly appearing). As Tony expressed it: "Why should faithful Christians be concerned about the color choice for a cup by a secular retail outlet?" Outrage was even expressed by some offended by the outrage caused by the cup's color. What does the color of a cup have to do with the meaning of the season—the celebration of God's gift and the promise that through the gift of that particular life we all have hope beyond this particular time and place? The sermon title Tony used framed this situation as standing at the intersection of the important (those things having to do with Christ's birth, the cross and resurrection) and the totally inane (those things without meaning). As we enter into Advent this year perhaps we should move away from that particular intersection and focus on the important things we know about Advent: about the *hope* we find in the good news brought to us all on that particular birthday; about the *peace* to be found by trusting in the promises made through the cross; about the *joy* to be found in a relationship with the Lord; about the *love* which bestowed such a gift in the person of Jesus the *Christ*. These are the images we mark during worship as we journey through this season with the lighting of the Advent Candles. In many ways we should not separate these two major seasons (Advent and Lent) within the life of the church for they are intertwined completely. The life begun on that day when the Advent Season ends with Christmas Eve and Morning steadfastly led to the cross

on a hill outside Jerusalem and to the atoning sacrifice through which we are promised salvation by the resurrection. The entire story—the good news we have—is so much bigger than the color of a coffee cup—or any other inane detail that we can use to distract ourselves from the really important story. I haven't yet noticed any outrage over retail choices made for items sold during the season, but I have already begun seeing angry posts about the greetings offered during this season with the now familiar cry to put Christ back in Christmas which is somehow negated by the expression Happy Holidays. My default greeting for this season is always "Merry Christmas", but when greeted by others with Happy Holidays, I find it hard to be offended. In this country we have religious freedom, and they may not be Christians. If that is the case, another form of well wishing is probably more in keeping with their beliefs. Whatever the case, to me the way Christ is put in Christmas is by the way we treat one another with love and respect all year. Rather than worry about putting Christ into a greeting, I would like to see more of an effort to put Christ back in those claiming to be Christian as shown in our witness and deeds. My hope for this Advent season that we begin this journey with hope, find peace and joy, and learn to live into the love promised by both seasons of the church year. The poet Ann Weens published a collection of poems titled "Kneeling in Bethlehem". The following is one I find particularly apt as we enter the season and seek to find the child who awaits us.

In Search Of Our Kneeling Places

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,

An inn where we must ultimately answer

Whether there is room or not.

When we are Bethlehem-bound

We experience our own advent in his.

When we are Bethlehem-bound

We can no longer look the other way

Conveniently not seeing stars

Not hearing angel voices.

We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily tending our sheep or our kingdoms.

This Advent let's go to Bethlehem

And see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.

In the midst of shopping sprees

Let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.

Through the tinsel

Let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.

In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,

Let's look for the brush of angel's wings.

This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem and find our kneeling places.

Pastor Libby