



I love Christmas. I love everything about it. I love the smell and the sounds. I love the glitter and the glitz. I love the gifts and Christmas cards. I love the special foods and the celebrations. The litany of what's nice about Christmas is almost endless.

And so as I sit back and relish the joys of the Christmas festivities that begin earlier and earlier each year, I scratch my head and wonder...what does Advent mean to me? Why do we even celebrate it? I mean we all know the outcome...Jesus was born a long time ago. Pretending that we are still waiting to celebrate Christmas as if the knowledge of Christ's birth was the best kept secret almost seems ridiculous. And you wonder: why go through this every December?

I wrestled with that question throughout this past week. What could I say, that would make sense out of these Advent Candles and the waiting and watching themes of Advent? And then it hit me. It hit me over the head while reflecting on today's first reading ...when I realized that the value, the heart, the meaning of Advent is that it challenges me, challenges all of us, to see Christmas not as the tinsel and a collection of warm and fuzzy feelings but as a challenge to take our faith very seriously. Advent is a calling out to our hearts and not just to our senses.

Advent is a pair of glasses that allows us to see Christmas the right way. Christmas isn't about poinsettias and Christmas trees, Christmas cards and wonderful gifts. Christmas is about compassion and tenderness when the world has gone crazy and is out of control. Advent is about finding the deeper meaning of Christmas that digs underneath those wonderful feelings of this "happiest time of the year." Advent leads us to discover that Christ came to teach us how to live with and for each other. One of the problems with all the beauty and merriment of Christmas is that it obscures the pain and suffering that surround us in our country, our neighborhoods...yes, even in our own lives. How easy it is to turn our eyes away from children who are starving and families who are struggling to make ends meet. How easy it is to cover our ears because we cannot bear to hear the pain of people who must suffer prejudice and hatred. How difficult it is to live in a world where sexism determines how we view and treat women...or one is treated differently because the color of a person's skin is different from the predominately Caucasian vista of our society...or because a person is gay or handicapped or seen to be different....and all of this because we fail to perceive the richness of God's glorious act of creation and prefer, rather, to narrow-mindedly view the world from a prejudicial and exclusionary point of view.

Do you think that the pain of a Ferguson, Missouri, is an act of selfishness by a group of malcontents who will never be satisfied? Or can we see that this is a reflection of a society that is infected by prejudice and hatred? How much pain must our world surround us with before we stop and ask ourselves...what should I be doing in response to this suffering that many try to bury but will not go away.

Advent is saying to us, if you want to celebrate Christmas then you must listen to the words of today's first reading. You and I must heed the command of the great prophet, Isaiah, and bring comfort to God's people. We must make the pathway straight as we prepare for the coming of the Lord. Each of us must be a shepherd who tends to our brothers and sisters who are struggling with life and who suffer the injustices of a world where selfishness and self-centeredness have replaced the passion for justice and tenderness that is the hallmark of the child born in the stable.

I love Christmas. I hope I always love Christmas. But I also hope that I learn every year during this Season of Advent to never forget that the joy of Christmas without the compassion of Christ is hollow and meaningless. To be a people of faith is to rejoice in endless celebration of the gift of God's love made real in Jesus Christ. But to be a people of faith is also to embrace the model of John the Baptist crying out "Prepare a way for the Lord." And we do that not in our decorations but in our deeds... in every expression of the tender love of God that we make real in everything that we say and everything that we do.