

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, December 2, 2018.**

Welcome to another season of Advent, that time of year when we prepare to welcome the Christ Child and thank God for fulfilling the promise of the Messiah, the Savior.

There are four Sundays in this Season of Advent. Our Advent wreath contains four candles, spaced evenly on the outside of the wreath.

- The first candle is known as the Prophecy Candle and signifies Hope.
- Next Sunday's Candle is the Angels candle and signifies Peace.
- The following Sunday is the Shepherd's Candle and signifies Joy.
- And on the Last Sunday of Advent we will light the Bethlehem Candle which signifies Love.

The Christ Candle, the large candle in the middle of the wreath, will be lit on Christmas Eve. But first things first: the Season of Advent.

Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. Four powerful themes as we begin a new Church Year.

Note too that on the Third Sunday the candle is rose in color rather than violet. This color change is simply a reminder that, while the Christ Child is on the way, he is not here yet. The rose color is a kind of spiritual tease, but with a purpose. We mustn't let up in our preparation.

What can get lost in this Candle analysis is the Wreath itself. It is doing the heavy lifting. It is providing a home for the five Candles. Without the Wreath, a Candle focus would be more difficult. So, today, on this first Sunday of Advent, before we address the Hope Candle, let us spend a little time with Mr. Wreath.

If truth be told, you and I sometimes feel like Mr. Wreath. We work hard, but we wonder sometimes if this hard work gets its due. Maybe we feel under-appreciated at home, or perhaps at work. Others don't seem to do as much, but seem to receive accolades when we get only nods. This is not a healthy feeling.

Take the Advent Wreath. At the end of the Season, if we are a live wreath rather than an artificial one, we serve a purpose and then get tossed. The Christmas Candle gets saved for the following year. Even the smaller candles have a future. They are stored in a drawer with potential.

The artificial wreath we have here suffers a different fate. It doesn't get tossed. It gets stored. It survives, but in a closet. In the dark. Forgotten for ten or eleven months.

Well, given the "heavy lifting that the wreath does," doesn't it deserve a better fate? So, as we work through this Advent Season, let us not take Mr. Wreath for granted. And let us make sure that in our daily lives we are not taking our neighbors and strangers for granted.

And let us also make sure that, if we feel we are being taken for granted, we have sufficient self-pride to carry on. It's called the Service Industry, and it's critical to the well-being of any society. Holding things and people afloat and aloft, with or without recognition, is a noble calling. So, Mr. Wreath, thank you.

Okay. Moving on. The Hope Candle, also called the Prophecy Candle.

At the time Jesus was born, the Jews had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah, the One God would send to usher in a New Day. From Jeremiah **(Jeremiah 33:14-16)**: "In those days and at that time I will cause a Righteous Branch to spring up." Indeed, in every generation, prophets would proclaim the coming of the Messiah and urge their fellow-Jews to get ready, to hold-on, to keep the Faith. The prophets were the heads-up people of their day. Watch out. The time has come. Get prepared. Don't miss out.

Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, was not the first to be proclaimed as the Messiah. Other candidates had come and gone, but none seemed to be the One. Finally, though, Jesus appeared. The circumstances of his birth set him apart from others. His comprehension and teaching ability as a twelve year-old set him apart from others. His baptism and miracles set him apart from others. And, while he wasn't the only one crucified, his resurrection certainly set him apart from others.

Initially, hope had been dashed, as had been the case many times before. But for those who witnessed the resurrection and the events that followed, hope was restored and fulfilled. Consider, though, what would have happened if hope itself hadn't been proclaimed over many centuries. And consider what would have happened if Jesus himself didn't have a sense of purpose. What happens when there is nothing to be fulfilled?

Well, thanks to the prophets who kept hope alive, there was a role to be fulfilled, and Jesus claimed that role. Would people have responded to Jesus if there had been no hope? Doubtful. But there was hope, and we have the prophets to thank for that. They kept hope alive.

Every age needs people to keep hope alive. Our age needs it. Every community needs members to keep hope alive. Sometimes we lose hope. Our hopes are dashed. Imagine if there weren't family and friends and neighbors to sustain our hope. Not prophets of doom, but prophets of hope.

The promise of a Messiah did not die. Attempts were made in every generation to negate this promise. But brave people, hopeful people, resilient people kept the promise alive. So, when Jesus came along, there was a role waiting for him. A coincidence? No way. God was in charge and took command and entered human life in a miraculous way. And that Divine initiative never stopped, even when crucifixion was employed. **From Psalm 25:** "Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting." God's love never stops.

Our job, many centuries later, is to be prophets to our generation and the next. For you and me, however, the task is different from the Old Testament prophets. Our job is not just to preserve hope of the Messiah, but to acknowledge that this hope has been fulfilled. There is a new era of hope that we are responsible for. "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Even as we acknowledge an historical event, we point to the future. The need to proclaim hope is never satisfied. The task is always present. The world always has its share of discouragement. In Luke's gospel (**Luke 21:25-36**), Jesus says as much: "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world." So, prophets are always needed. And these prophets need nourishment.

As we will note several times over the next four weeks, Advent is our training table.

We come together to be strengthened for the task ahead, which is to proclaim the Good News. The Messiah has arrived. We believe that. But not everyone does. While the capacity to hope is a given, fulfillment of hope is not a given. There is work to be done. There is a Story to share. Prophets are needed, not to predict, but to confirm. So, don't let up. Continue to prepare. As Jesus said, "Be on guard so your hearts are not weighed down."

And remember that this work doesn't get done without a solid foundation. At a minimum, we are part of the Wreath, and proud of it. And, if you think Hope is important, wait until we get to Peace, Joy, and Love. Next week: same time, same station. Amen.