

BEYOND THE TINSEL: UNWRAPPING THE MEANING OF ADVENT

The request to write this, my first Advent reflection for the web as a new national chaplain, posed a challenge – how to best capture the spirit of Advent?

Four key words came to mind: Advent is a time of “expectant hope” and “joyful preparation.”

Newly minted Oblate Bishop Pierre Olivier Tremblay, shares how he found the university students he worked with lacked hope because they did not have an “infinite horizon” of faith, a “meta-narrative,” a bigger picture into which they could place the events of their lives. All they were left with was what happened to them that day, and if their boy or girlfriend broke up with them, it was like the end of the world – some would even take their own lives!

There is a pattern in our lives: faith gives deep meaning and purpose to all the events of our lives, enabling us to hope things can improve. And hope empowers us to love, to share our faith and hope with others. The opposite pattern begins with doubt, which robs us of hope, which then leads to despair. Despair leads us to lose our ability to love, and without love, we die.

Our Advent faith lies in the in-breaking of God’s unconditional love into our world in the form of a humble, small, powerless little child. What a mystery! That the creator of this world would love us so much as to enter completely and totally into our wounded reality, become fully human in such a mysterious, humble, luminous way is almost beyond comprehension, yet opens the door to a response of deep hope and incredible love in return. For some theologians, Christmas is already Easter – the Incarnation is already Resurrection! We cannot and should not separate the crib from the cross. The power of the saving mystery of the Paschal Mystery is unleashed for us through a tiny baby at the Incarnation.

That realization calls for a special time of joyful preparation we name Advent, inviting us to be as ready as we can be, to celebrate this earth-shaking event still reverberating throughout our world over two thousand years later.

My trailer can serve as an Advent metaphor. I have half a knee left due to an accident, and can no longer skate, jog, run, ski – even excessive walking wears out the rest of the knee my doctor and I are trying to save. So, my exercise now consists of kayaking, swimming, sailboarding (as it is non-impact), and riding my scooter as much as possible. Each January I travel to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel parish in the southern states for a writing holiday with my trailer, scooter, kayak and sailboard. During these days

of Advent, I love to get the trailer ready on my days off – adapting the rig, checking all the fittings, painting, improving it. It is a time of joyful preparation in hopeful expectation of my departure in mid-January.

That is what Advent is meant to be – a time of hopeful expectation and joyful preparation. The best way we can do that is to let Jesus be the Messiah for us already. As the Messiah, he came to redeem and to sanctify us – to forgive and to heal. May I suggest three ways we can best prepare to celebrate for his coming?

First, a sincere celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, receiving his forgiveness and healing. Second, spending a bit more time in contemplative prayer, soaking up his unconditional love for us.

Finally, seeking to practice Vincentian charity by visiting needy families, helping prepare Christmas hampers, and especially helping with such initiatives as the North of Sixty Project. A recent conversation with Sr. Faye Tromblay in Tuktoyaktuk, N.W.T. reminded me of the hope this project gives to her and to her community with the challenges they face in the far north.

So, as we enter into this special time of Advent and begin a new liturgical year, let be for us a time of expectant hope and joyful preparation.

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