

## ***We Don't Know Where Advent Begins***

It is a paradox that as the light fades from the sky and the year comes to its end, we are full of expectation and the hope of renewal. No matter how you spend the Christmas season, it brings an important message: hope, peace, joy, love, forgiveness, healing and comfort. I know that many of us are getting busier with so many things to do during this time, but we don't want to miss a chance to grow spiritually in this very important season of the Christian year.

Today we have lit the candle of hope for the first week of Advent. Where do you find hope in your lives? Where do you find hope in the stories of the Bible? I think we can find hope in today's text, because we don't know when our Lord is coming. Jesus says in Matthew 24:42 "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Here Jesus is talking about his second coming. We can't predict when and how he is coming to us – nobody can foresee it. There will be no star to light the way for wise men, who were among the very few to expect Christ's arrival on earth more than two millennia ago.

Today we know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea about 2000 years ago. We are familiar with the Nativity story which came down to us from generation to generation; you know the stories about Mary and Joseph, shepherds and angels, an indifferent innkeeper and generous wise men. The Nativity story is one of the most famous stories in the world. But we, as Christians, need to remember what the people of the Nativity actually experienced and believed.

Mary and Joseph were not hero and heroine; they were just living a simple life in a small town. How could anyone, including Mary and Joseph, expect that Christ was going to be born to this unknown family? When the shepherds heard the good news from an angel, they went to see the Saviour that the angel was talking about. You know what they found; they found Mary, Joseph and a baby lying in a manger. How could anyone believe that God came down as *a baby* lying in *a manger*? Surprisingly, they did believe. What they experienced was the God who was revealed in their ordinary life, and what

they believed in was the God of ordinary people, the God they experienced on a daily basis.

This is where Advent begins: not from a specific place or day, but from the faith of those few people who witnessed the beginning of Christ's life on earth. In other words, we don't know where our advent begins, because we don't know when and how God is coming to us. All we can say about advent is "I don't know", and all we can do about this advent season is to accept our limitations and to open ourselves up to new possibilities through everything we do.

The Bible is full of unexpected stories, and precisely because of that reason, it speaks about hope. For example, Noah was given a mission to build an ark when people thought everything was normal, Abraham was told to travel away from his country without any specific direction, Jacob had a vivid encounter with God when he laid down to sleep with his head on a stone, and Moses received his calling after he saw a very strange thing, a burning bush which was not consumed by the flames. All of them experienced God in unconventional and unexpected ways through which they were inspired to renew their communion and revitalize their community.

Our lives are also full of so many unexpected things. We did not expect so much snow and freezing temperatures last week in Ladysmith. No one knew that the Light-Up festival was going to be postponed. Who knew that I was going to be your minister and you were going to be my congregation? We experience unexpected things almost every day whether they are bad or good, whether they are challenges or blessings. So the question is -how do you live your faith when unexpected things happen?

Let me share my story with you. You may remember that I was eagerly waiting for my family during the summer. We applied for our visa to renew our status in Canada, when we were in Vancouver. While Ha Na and Peace visited Ha Na's parents in Korea during the summer, I moved to Ladysmith by myself to settle into our church and this town. Everything went well with your great hospitality, and I was getting excited about welcoming my family. I just needed to receive the visa from the government for myself and my family.

One day I opened my post office box, and there was the envelope with the visa in it. I was so happy until I found out that there were only two visas, one for me and one for my son. Ha Na's visa was missing. That was strange because she was the applicant for our family's visa. We should not have received the visa without Ha Na's visa attached. My happiness turned to anxiety; I did everything I could do, and was as patient as I could be, but I was worried. The government issued her visa again, but I had to wait for more than two months until it arrived.

You know what I did while I was waiting for her visa? I checked my mail box every day, sometimes twice a day, and sometimes checked with the postal officials. Every day when I woke up, I thought, this is the day I will get the visa, and then I would go and check the box and find nothing. Every day, day after day, the same excitement, and the same disappointment, but I did not give up nor relax my attention. I was living between anxiety and hope every hour and every day.

That experience taught me a lot about waiting for Christ. Because we don't know when and how our Christ is coming, in every day and every hour Jesus can be both coming *and* not coming – we need to accept uncertainty as our reality. But that uncertainty can lead us to see every hour and every decision as a chance to experience God's grace.

We don't really know where our advent begins, just like people have never really known exactly where advent began; this uncertainty is, ironically, our hope, because advent can start with all that you do, all that you are and where you are; at home, at work, in this church, in this town, and in this world.