

The Candles of Advent
A Sermon by
The Reverend Bill Clark

My first experience around this idea of advent was not one of candles, conversions or commitments – no not at all – it was all about calendars. Large sparkling advent calendars with small shiny doors numbered one to twenty-five. I know you have seen them – perhaps you have one on your fridge?

Now-a-days many of these calendars are a bit larger and behind each door is a piece of candy – mainly chocolate – at least in the Clark household. Finding and revealing the candy as each door is opened, I assume, was to make it more entertaining and fun for children and youth – oh, and definitely for the chocolate loving minister I know.

Yet advent is more than calendars with candy or wreaths with evergreens. Advent is a holy time of waiting and anticipating to hold up and honor the qualities of hope, peace, joy and love

For our Christian brothers and sisters advent is about expectation and hope where in the season of Lent (40 days prior to Easter) the focus is on repentance and forgiveness.

For us Unitarian Universalist it is approaching this season to honor the qualities of the teacher symbolically born on Christmas Day. Each Sunday prior to Christmas a candle is lit on the advent wreath representing one of these qualities. The first Sunday of advent was last Sunday, December 1st when the “Prophecy Candle” is lit in honor of hope.

If there is one thing this world needs right now it is the quality hope. Reverend William Sloane Coffin says it best; “Hope arouses as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible.” For me this is the image of the wide open field of possibilities in honoring hope.

Author, Palmer Parker, relates in a story he tells of a friend of his who worked for many years at the Catholic Worker, a ministry to the poor in New York City. Daily, he writes, she tries to respond to the waves of human misery that are as ceaseless as surf in that community. She responds with enduring hope. Out of deep not knowing I asked her how she could keep doing a work that never showed any results, a work in which the problems keep getting worse instead of better.

I will never forget her enigmatic answer, he writes: “The thing you don’t

understand, Parker, is that just because something is impossible doesn't mean you shouldn't do it!"

"Hope arouses as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible."

{Come forward to light candle of hope}

HYMN: #95 There is more hope somewhere

The second candle of advent represents peace – it is often called the angel candle for peace! I guess when one thinks of peace – an angel would be one of my first impressions.

I know in any holiday card I have ever sent out it must have the word peace written on the outside. Peace.

If there is one lesson to be taken from birth of the babe born in Bethlehem it is that of peace. As he stated: "Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness but because you deserve peace."

We all deserve to live with peace. As his holiness the Dalai Lama states; "Peace does not mean just a mere absence of violence, peace is a way of living in this world."

So how do we cultivate this way of living peacefully in this world?

First we must examine our own hearts to see if we are responding peacefully to events happening in our lives. St. Francis put it this way; "while you are proclaiming peace on your lips be careful to have it even more fully in your heart."

In the back of our hymnal there is a reading by Lao-Tse which begins with: If there is to be peace in the world... there must be peace in the nations.....from peace in the nations.....peace in the cities.....from the cities.....peace between neighbors.....peace in the home.....if there is to be peace in the home.....there must be peace in the heart."

Peace begins right here (point to heart). It is up to us – all of us to cultivate this life of peace.

So we light our last candle to hold up and honor peace.

(Susanna comes forward to light the candle of peace)

Music: There is more peace somewhere.....

Next Sunday, December 15th, the pink candle is lighted to represent Joy. In the birth narrative found in the Christian scriptures this symbolizes the shepherds experience of joy as they watched over their flocks by

night. "Do not be afraid for I bring you tidings of great joy."

When examining joy I frequently turn to the writings of J. Ruth Gendler, who describes joy as being; spontaneous, patient and elusive.

Certainly the spontaneous joy is the experience of the shepherds. Any time a sentence begins with: "do not be afraid" you are guaranteed some kind of spontaneous experience – in the shepherds case it is pure joy. "I bring you tidings' of great joy."

And who has not experienced joy in this manner? A surprised guest at your holiday table – the homecoming of a returning soldier – the announcement of another grandchild – the diagnosis of being cancer free – all wonderful experiences of spontaneous joy.

Joy can be patient as well. The hard and arduous joy following the hard and arduous work of rehabilitation and education. Who has not felt this patient joy following days, months and years of sobriety – or in one's last round of chemo or radiation therapy. The patient joy of finishing ones dissertation or observing a loved ones patient work on recovery. Patient joy abounds.

Finally Gendler speaks of joy as elusive. We can see her in the far off but the distance between us seems enormous.

Especially at this time of year elusive joy seems everywhere. The state of our nation. The state of the world. The untimely death of loved ones. This elusive joy seems out of our reach and yet she waits for us. Her desire to walk with us is as great as our longing to accompany her.

So we light our third pink candle to the many aspects of joy.

(Eric comes forward to light the joy candle)

Music: There is more joy somewhere

In many of the adaptations of advent the final candle is lit for love. This candle of love (sometimes labled as faith) represents the love and faith on that journey taken by Mary and Joseph. All of us have, at some point in our lives have taken a journey where the destination or outcome were unbeknownst to us. Or when our faith and love of all is under attack.

An example can be found right here in our own back yard. Some of our houses of worship recently have come under attack for our faith and belief that all human beings have inherent worth and dignity. Any house of worship displaying a rainbow flag outside had a sticker taped just under the flag (as our was) that read "God does not celebrate what is considered sin." It appeared at the West Tisbury Church, Methodist

Church and the Hebrew Center – swastikas have appeared in the MVRHS bathrooms – on the journey of that faith/ in the worth and dignity of every human being – we meet up with hatred and bigotry.

We light this candle of love in the belief that love conquers all hate as we anticipate the rebirth of hope, peace, joy and love.

(Come forward to light final candle) Kristy comes forward to light candle. *Music: #95 There is more love somewhere.....*

So, my friends, our candles of advent are all lit up. May the light of these flames be a reminder to all as we await the qualities of advent; hope, peace, joy and love to illuminate our path this holiday season.

May we be the change we wish to see in this world.

Amen and Blessed be.