

December 10, 2017

“Be Prepared to Receive God’s Love”

Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

Today is the second Sunday of Advent and we lit the candle of love. A little bit of a quiz. Last Sunday was the first Sunday of Advent. On the first Sunday of Advent we always hear the message of what? The Scripture passage assigned for the first Sunday was always about.... Does anyone remember? (Advent means “coming.”) Yes, we always hear about the second coming of Jesus on the first Sunday of Advent.

On the second Sunday of Advent we always hear about John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus by preaching the message of repentance. He said, “Turn around. Make a U-turn of your lives. Christ is coming.” He invited people to receive the baptism of repentance in the Jordan River.

Why repentance in the season of Advent? We are not in the season of Lent. We are in the season of Advent and Christmas, a happy time, waiting to hear the good news of the birth of Christ. Why do we need to turn around, make a u-turn of our lives and change our ways to prepare ourselves to receive the good news of Christ’s birth?

I think it’s because we forget. We forget what Christmas is all about. We forget who the center of all the celebration is. We forget what we are celebrating. We forget that we and this world are still in dire need of God’s love and God’s redeeming grace. We sometimes forget that Christmas is about the birth of Jesus, our Savior and Christ.

We forget that Christmas is not about Santa and the presents we receive. We forget that it’s not about decorating, about the food and drinks we consume or it’s not even about a Christmas tree, however pretty it is. We forget that Christmas is about God becoming human to live and dwell among us so that we may know that God is with us, Emmanuel.

The question we would like to ask ourselves is, “Can we still be thankful for the birth of Christ even without those extra things we do to celebrate Christmas? Can we still celebrate Christmas without those lovely extra things?”

Last year, December 25 was Sunday and I asked the people who gathered for the service on Christmas morning to share their memorable Christmas in the past. One of them shared with us how special and meaningful their first Christmas was as a

couple just out of college. It was probably the most sparse Christmas in their lives but they knew what the most important thing in their lives was -- which was to receive gladly the love God offered through Christ's birth and to share and appreciate it with each other. This person said, "We often overdo Christmas. Less is more." In our sparsity what's most important becomes clear and shines through, doesn't it?

The Advent season of 1991 was a challenging one for me and Susumu, my husband. I had been on a bed rest in my pregnancy for a month and I had to be in bed for the next three months. My mobility was restricted except for going to the bathroom and taking a shower. Before going to work, Susumu prepared a breakfast and a lunch for me and left them in our bedroom, where I was. Some of our friends took a turn to bring in a supper during the week. We were living in an apartment on the second floor in Ridgefield, NJ, at that time. One evening, there was a knock on the door. It was the carolers from Teaneck UMC. They came to bring the message of Christmas to us, especially to me, who could not attend any of the Christmas services. I stood at one of the windows of our bedroom and listened to the familiar carols sung to God for us.

That was our Christmas moment for that year. As I reflect on that experience, I am grateful for those carolers. I don't even remember whether or not we had a Christmas tree at that time. The memory of the carolers, however, stands out because they shared with us the love of God, who had sent Christ to this world.

When we are challenged in many ways and do not have many extras, God's love expressed by others shines through, pointing to the true message of Christmas, God with us.

Our family will not forget a Christmas a few years ago. Both Susumu and I were busy as pastors in this season and we had asked our son, Kohei, to get a cut tree after he came back from college. He came back home, I think it was on Dec. 22, and he went out looking for a tree the next day. He went to all the stores we could think of in the south shore and in the north shore, but couldn't find a tree for our family. I was devastated. A Christmas without a tree! It was going to be the first Christmas without a tree as far as I could remember. I knew in my head that Christmas is not about a tree. The words came to my mind: "Preachers, listen to your sermons." But my heart sunk when I thought of Christmas morning without a tree. I had a wooden manger scene in the living room. I knew that it was truly going to be the center of our Christmas celebration as it should be. Then I remembered a Christmas

tree in a box in the attic. It was a crocheted Christmas tree a friend of mine had made and given to me years before. An extra toilet paper roll was inside.

On Christmas Eve after the service, I put the Christmas tree on the table in our living room and placed the presents around it. It became one of the most memorable Christmas trees. We had enough. When we sat on the couches in the living room and opened the presents on Christmas morning, somehow our son said, “It is the best Christmas ever.” Less is more.

When we scale down to simplicity, what’s more important becomes clearer. I was thankful for the friendship of my friend who had spent time crocheting a Christmas tree for me and also for her other co-workers. I was thankful for the love we shared in the family. I was thankful to God, who is the Source of love, as I John 4:7 says, “Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God.” Less is more.

If we find something lacking in this Advent season, if things are not going our way, if we find our planning and preparation for Christmas to be reduced to the bare minimum against our wishes, it might be an opportunity given for us to stop and turn around and listen to the simple message of Christmas, God with us, Emmanuel. Less is more.

Some of us may be saying to ourselves, “Simplicity is good, but I don’t feel any love coming my way.”

God came. Jesus came, taking a human form to show us how much he loves us. Let’s listen to the Word of God.

“Christ, though in the image of God, didn’t deem equality with God, something to be clung to—but instead became completely empty and took on the image of oppressed humankind: born into the human condition, found in the likeness of a human being. Jesus was thus humbled...” (Philippians 2:6-8)

His humbleness was to convey with his own body how much he loves us and how much God loves us.

In this Advent and Christmas, let’s receive anew the love of God, who sent the Son to us, and the love of Christ, who took a human form to be born and to serve us. And let’s share that love with others. Thank you for the gifts you have brought to the church today for Adopt a Family and for the Christmas Shop at St. Joseph the

Worker RCC. Join us, if you can, in going Christmas caroling this afternoon (we meet at 3:00p.m.) to visit those who will not be able to hear the message of Christmas at church. Join us next week in sending Christmas cards to some members of our church family, who live afar or would appreciate receiving them this Christmas.

Let's celebrate the love that came on Christmas by receiving it gladly and by sharing it generously. Amen.