

## ARE WE THERE YET?!

This time of year is a real mixed bag. On the one hand, Advent and Christmas can be exciting times; we're looking forward to family get-togethers, singing the familiar carols, sharing gifts and meals together.

But it can also be a very difficult time for some people. Loneliness and isolation prevent some folks from enjoying the holiday. Hymns and carols can trigger bad memories and depressions.



Blood pressure rises due to the rat-race nature of finding the right gifts and getting to that next party, and lining up for the next sale and big discounts: Red Thursday, Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Boxing Day. Shop till you drop... For more and more people it's enough to stretch them to the snapping point. No wonder that during this time depression and suicide increase more than any other time of year.

And churches are no different. From Christmas Teas to carolling to Advent Series to pageants and choral cantatas - along with the demanding rehearsal schedules, church folks barely find the time to fit all the festivities in our schedules.

Things like silent time and moments of reflection on Advent readings from Scripture are at a high premium. Many times, the premium is too high. The only moment we have may be at worship - *if* we can fit it in. And even if we make it to worship, it better be no too long, or it will cut into our many other activities that are waiting for us at home.

Advent is also a time when frustration can lead to short tempers. Perfectly reasonable people can suddenly get snappy and yell at you, or get upset about something you never saw coming.

Isn't it ironic? Advent is the one time of year when we are offered a moment of grace and contemplation, an opportunity to slow down and rest, and think about our priorities - but too often the opposite happens: we get rest-less and hurried, and often we get pulled onto the souped-up merry-go-round of all the must-do things that TV and radio commercials, billboards, the news and our neighbours are telling us to do.

And instead of a time of grace and contemplation to help us put things in God's perspective, Advent becomes just one more thing to squeeze into our busy schedules. We can get so busy and restless and distracted, we often can't hear God's still, small voice anymore.

"Advent" means "arrival". "Arrival" implies movement. Something is coming this way, something big and important. The arrival of Jesus and the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promises to us, made so long ago. That's something big and important alright.

And yet, all we can do is... wait. Sure, you can jump up and start wining "are we there yet?" every 15 minutes and drive everyone else to distraction, but it won't make things arrive any faster. You'll just have to wait, and be patient and slow down. Enjoy the Advent journey, and ask yourself what it is we're really waiting for.

Advent takes us through a journey of self-discovery and change.

Some years our personal discovery of the Christ child is more dramatic than other years, but there is always a sense that this child is re-born in us, each and every year. We wait, and we hope - for a very personal experience of the Holy. And if we take the time for it, it can be as if it's happening for the very first time, and we feel the peace on earth, proclaimed by the angels as we never have heard it before. "Peace toward all men, and glory in the highest!"

We hope for the time when the singing of "Joy to the World" will be true, *literally* true. We hope for the time when all weapons of war and destruction have been changed to agricultural implements, tools that sustain life.

The Christ who is arriving will be the ruler. He will be the one who gathers the sheep and goats together; and if you know your scriptures you know that in this case, you really wanna be a sheep (and if you don't, just look it up in Matthew 25).

It is about the world actually living by God's laws, a world where Shalom is fully realized, and there is no mistaking that sin and evil are a thing of the past. We can't *wait* for it to happen and can't help but jump up and down in excitement and ask "Are we there yet?" And this time, no one will tell you to stop wining because this is something *everyone* is waiting for to become a reality.

*That's* the "perfect gift" we are waiting for. Not the perfect gift as advertised in the Best Buy, WallMart and Canadian Tire commercials. Not that elaborate meal with the 30-pound turkey that took two people to hoist into the oven. But the gift of love, of new life and compassion.

If we can't wait for peace on earth we wait for it best by *living* the peace on earth, just like Jesus showed us. We may not be able to beat our actual swords and guns into plowshares but we can convert some of our resources into food for the poor - such as donating food to the food-bank, or supporting the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Our White Gift Sunday and Grow-a-Row and the Mitten Tree outreach initiatives good places to start.

The real meaning of Christmas can become a hard fact by focussing more on relationships, and on things that will last, things that can *not* be bought.

You can't buy peace, but you can live it; and look, it spreads like wildfire. You can't buy love (as the Beatles sang), but you can live it; and look, it will spread and take hold.

But you can not serve two masters. You can not live "peace" or "love" *and* stay on that souped-up merry-go-round that the world wants us to believe is Christmas.

Here is a video with just one small example of what it means to "live love, life and compassion" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOfFhod2LjY>)

Did you see what happened there? This team *gave* the game *away*. Not because their coach told them to (he didn't even know about it) or to be cool, but out of compassion for someone who didn't fit in. And by doing this they discovered the power of living *and* giving in love. How selfless giving benefits not just the one who receives, but the one who gives just as much.

One of the teens even chokes up when he talks about how this changed him - not a little bit or for just that day, but for his entire life.

Now this is just a one-time idea from a few teens. But what if *churches* started doing this - and not just once, but all the time?

Well, maybe it would look like a bit like what rev. Joyce and Peter Fergus-Moore are doing right now. They are serving on the United Church's Ecumenical Accompanier Program in Occupied Palestine Territory; Peter in Bethlehem, Joyce in Jerusalem. Joyce and Peter stand in silent witness with the Palestinian families whose homes get bulldozered to make place for Israeli settlements. Whose traditional olive groves get cut down to destroy their livelihood.

Whose hospitals and schools get raided again and again by armed Israeli forces for no apparent reason.

Their presence is a courageous form of non-violent resistance, reminding the Israeli government of Isaiah's powerful prophesy that "Nations will never again go to war, and never prepare for battle again."

In this season of giving and receiving we can be both giver *and* receiver. Only by *giving away* priceless love we will receive priceless love. Only by *giving away* priceless peace we will receive priceless peace.

And as we do that, we are opened up to the surprising grace and presence of God, who gave *us* priceless love and peace in the person of the one born so long ago in Bethlehem, the one whose birth we eagerly await this year. *Are we there yet?!*

This gift is not ours to keep, but to pass on and give to others. And every time it gets passed on, it grows and grows, and nothing in this world can stop it.

Welcome to Advent. Amen.