

PRESENTATION TO THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP
DECEMBER 6, 2015

“Darkness and Light, Oppression and Liberty”

Speaker: the Rev. Ken Moffat

(Using some historical examples of oppression and liberation and employing the themes of light and darkness, I will attempt to expose some of the contemporary meanings of advent)

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me back to your Unitarian fellowship today. I cherish the friendship and love I feel in your midst.

When Delores Dickey invited me to be here with you today, I remember some of the words she used. She suggested that I might speak about “some of the mysteries around advent”. Well, at once that rather intrigued me - “Some of the mysteries surrounding Advent”!! That can run the gamut from a youngster’s anticipation of the coming of Christmas morning and what Santa might have left under the Christmas tree to the childish speculation as to whether or not the angels sing every year over Bethlehem – as one late theologian of note confessed he did as a child. I’m not really sure what Delores had in mind, but she’s given me license to wrestle with the theme of Advent, a Christian term meaning “coming”. It was as late as the 6th century when the term Advent came into prominent Church use. Around then came the development of the three year liturgical cycle of lessons, used by most of the mainstream churches today, in which the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day are called Advent Sundays. As you likely know, these are recognized as the beginning of the church year. These four Sundays are intended to lead Christian worshippers through a period of anticipatory reflection on the triumphant entry of God into the world in the form of the person of Jesus Christ. So lessons from scripture are chosen to help in that exercise.

One of the basic themes of advent therefore is hope. It picks up the basic human cry for -

- freedom from oppression
- deliverance from captivity
- freedom from poverty
- deliverance from enslavement to habits and societal processes that debilitate and destroy the human spirit

As such it picks up today’s cry from the refugees of Syria and other areas of the Middle East, and nations of Africa and elsewhere, where lives have been disrupted with civil war and terrorism. It picks up the cry of the late indigenous youth “Shannon” from Attawappiskat whom MP Charlie Angus told about in an interview on the CBC “Current” program on Friday morning November 27th, in which she is reported to have challenged the then minister of Indian Affairs to provide “appropriate education” for all indigenous children! Advent today picks up the silenced but profound, cry of all the youth from the Northern reserves, the inquest into whose deaths is presently being carried out in our city. These are some cries from the present for deliverance, for hope, for the redress of wrongs.

If we are listening at all, we cannot help but hear the plaintive cries from the earth and so many of our fellow creatures. The Polar Bears of the Arctic and Hudson's Bay, the whales, the lakes polluted with algae, our precious air which is more and more polluted across the planet – these, along with peoples, are crying out for redemption. But are they crying out for some supernatural being from the heavens? – for this is what humanity has often done in ancient times!

One of the Scripture lessons that is set out in the Lectionary for use in Advent Season is from the 40th Chapter of Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah penned the words for a downhearted and depressed group of Jewish people who had been exiled from their homeland for several decades now:

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her,
That her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned;
For she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” (KJV)

These words from the King James version of the Bible, have been immortalized in Handel's Messiah, and are often sung in the advent season. These remind us of that triumphantly redemptive message that re-ignited the spark of hope in a depressed and demoralized segment of the Jewish people who had been in exile for nearly 50 years in Babylon.

Isaiah goes on in exuberant language: “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”(KJV) These words were to be encouragement for these people, to now make the trek homeward to across difficult terrain, to re-establish justice and pursue the ways of peace in their homeland.

Further in Chapter 60 of Isaiah, the prophet employs the exhilarating theme of light, saying, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...Nations shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn (vs3)...the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended (vs20 NRSV)

There is such suggestiveness with the theme of light. “Arise, shine. For your light has come!” How glorious a comment to make to someone! To say to a worthy young performer, “Your star is rising” is to offer great encouragement.

Back around 600 BCE the Jewish nation had been caught between other greater military powers nearby. Miscalculating the impact of their own mischievous ways they got caught and paid the price. Their king and their leaders were taken off to Babylon as captives, and left to languish for decades – leaving the rest of the nation to suffer under the rules imposed by a domineering nation. These were dark days. Now to hear from a

credible prophet that the Light of God's compassion was about to be shed upon them was incredibly good news. Light as we know dispels darkness. Light enables truth to be exposed. Light enables us to walk confidently – we know where the objects are that we should avoid so that we won't get hurt. Light suggests understanding, comprehension, even discerning consciousness – midst what otherwise would be bewildering and confusing! It also suggests right relations and peace between individuals and groups.

From the Gospel of Mark, (which was written some forty years after Jesus died) and Matthew and Luke (which were written ten or fifteen years after Mark), there seems to be strong evidence that Jesus saw his own ministry as being aligned to what is spoken about in the Isaiah passages. He sees his role as that of a deliverer, a light giver, a redeemer, and the Gospel writers certainly uphold that view. Of course I believe they take it beyond how he saw himself. For example, in the Gospel of John, in which there are several "I am" statements, such as, "I am the good shepherd" (Jn 10:11); "I am the true vine" (Jn 15:1); "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (Jn 11:25); "I am the way the truth and the life" (Jn 11:25); the writer has Jesus saying "I am the Light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12). I think he greatly inflates what Jesus might have said. But he does that to describe Jesus' role on the universal scheme of things! So these gospel writers are portraying Jesus' on the larger canvas. And we find the Apostle Paul saying in 2nd Corinthians (4:6) "It is God who said "let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

We are now living in a Post Christian era. While multitudes long for deliverance from captivity, or oppression of one sort or another, surely we do not expect some supernatural ethereal being to provide that. While we are being confronted with the spectre of our planet potentially going beyond the 2 degrees warming, we know full well that the prevention of this is not going to be brought about by some messianic saviour. Our world is experiencing terrorism in an unprecedented manner, so that we despair of there being any sensible way of dealing with it other than a full concerted effort by many nations to eradicate ISIS. In the face of such circumstances it is understandable that many persons become hopeless for the future of our planet, and for peace and justice among the nations.

I feel very grateful that I was able to listen to a broadcast of "Ideas Tonight" on CBC on the night of October 8th recently. The speaker was Cornell West, of whom I had never heard, but with whose message and manner of speaking I was most intrigued. I found out he was an African American social justice activist, that had taught at Yale and Harvard. He was giving the Lloyd Axworthy lecture at the University of Winnipeg, bearing the title, "Social Justice and the Public Good". (You can still find it by going on to the archives of Ideas Tonight). At one point he said, "Justice must always be rescued by something deeper than justice", adding, "I believe in the profound mystery of truth and justice". Judging from the context of his address I believe that he meant that there is a spirituality from which justice must come, for on one occasion he says, "there is too much spiritual malnutrition in the world today".

But to come to my point in this story, someone in the audience asked him about “the hope that the state of the world possibly getting better”. He said, “I don’t think that hope is predicated on the basis that things would get better... if we lose in the long run we lose... but one finds joy in being a servant to others. We try and perhaps fail. We try again and fail better. We try again and fail better”. Then he added, “Integrity, Integrity, Integrity, that’s enough.” I felt he could have quoted the prophet Micah, “Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” – that is enough.

I suggest that in the face of the world’s problems we dare not lose hope! We dare to take the message from strong, sound, individuals who had mighty good things to say about how we treat one another, and how we relate to the earth, like Jesus, and the Buddha, and the Dalai Lama, and Chief Dan George – to name just a few. But we have to transfer that into today’s Global society. We have to try to be neighbour to the persons who fall prey to the scoundrels that are ever present in society, who not only snatch purses, but foul others’ good names, and rob others of their dignity, and cast thoughtless racial slurs wherever! We have to boldly stand for human rights, and children’s rights. We have to advocate for decent housing and removal of poverty and injustice. Its on-going isn’t it? That is part of the advent message of hope and light! We think! And we pay attention! And we become part of the answer of hope! We must steadfastly take care of the planet and its creatures and pay close attention to the scientists who keep us alert as to how we are doing. We must enthusiastically hail and support those who come up with the green technology efforts that aid us in the fight for the saving of the planet. All this is part of our longing and action in Advent today!

I understand that shortly we will be singing that very old latin hymn from around the 9th century! It was translated into English by John Mason Neale (and others) in 1851 using the 15th century plainsong melody, and then this was arranged by Healey Willan sometime in the 1900’s. The beginning words are:

“O come O come, Immanuel and ransom Captive Israel”

Might I suggest that Immanuel now is to be seen as the accumulation of all the assets of goodness, and love, and justice, and truth, and intelligent discernment on the planet today!

Maybe Captive Israel, is all of us that are subject to the captivity of consumerism’s cultural distractions that keep us from a true assessment of the world issues.

Again, we pick up the lines –

“O come O come Immanuel, and ransom Captive Israel,
That mourns in lowly exile here, Until the Son of God appear.”

May I make bold to suggest here that we look to the daughters and sons of today’s global society to rise with intelligence, with integrity, and sound intellectual capability to address the planets needs, and lead us in justice and peace loving ways! THEY ARE INDEED THE DAUGHTERS AND THE SONS OF GOD!

Then we can shout out,
Rejoice, Rejoice, Immanuel, shall come to thee O Israel! May it be so!

So may it be!