

**Pastor's Ponderings - December 2024 - Faith UCC, Boston**

Leslie and I have decided to not get a Christmas tree this year. Our tradition has long been to get a fresh cut tree on or around December 6, St. Nicholas Day, and keep it up until January 6, Epiphany. We love the smell of evergreen in the house and always look forward to trimming a few low branches off the tree to adorn the piano. But this year we have plans to be away for nearly three weeks to visit grandchildren (and their parents) in Georgia and Mexico beginning just two days after Christmas. Why bother with a tree? While the Christmas tree certainly carries pleasant feels of nostalgia for us and has an honorable history going back to 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany, it is not essential for celebrating Christmas. We'll make do instead with our Advent wreath.

As a pastor, I'm always very glad when Advent arrives. There are clear themes and familiar scriptures to orient our worship each week, and who wouldn't want to focus on hope, peace, joy, and love? Advent in our Christian calendar is a hope-filled time of eager anticipation of good things to come.

The word "advent" means "coming" or the arrival of something. It could be said, for example, that the advent of the internal combustion engine transformed transportation. For early Christians, the season of Advent was a solemn time of preparation for both the first and the second coming of Christ—the coming of Christ in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and the anticipated coming of Christ in a glorious and triumphant return to this world. Similar to Lent, fasting was more common than feasting during Advent for most of Christian history. Fasting and prayer were aimed at purifying one's soul to be ready to receive and be received by the coming Christ.

In modern times, thoughts of the second coming have largely dropped out of our Christmas preparations, and in some degree the heavy commercialization of Christmas over the past half century has put the first coming of Christ into the background of Christmas as well. It can be a good and healthy thing to focus on and live in the present rather than getting stuck in nostalgia for the past or fixated on imagined dramatic events in the future. But we mustn't forget the true meaning of Advent as a time to attend to the coming of Christ—in the past and in the future, and also in the present.

In our Christian faith, Christ is an ever-present reality. During this Advent season, let us contemplate the coming of Christ in the past, present, and future. In our Communion liturgy we say "Christ *has* died (past), Christ *is* risen (present), Christ *will* come again (future). Past, present, and future. Was, is, and is to come. Christ is always here and is always coming. Advent is always in process.

We'll be focusing on the Advent wreath this year at our house. We will light the candles this Advent both at home and at church for hope, peace, joy, and love. Let us remember that these too are realities that have come and are coming. We have known and we look forward to knowing the hope, peace, joy, and love of Christ in our lives.

May it be so.

