

PREPARING FOR THE LIGHT

TODAY IS THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT. HAVE YOU GIVEN THOUGHT YET TO WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU AND FOR THE DAYS AHEAD UNTIL CHRISTMAS AND EVEN BEYOND? IT IS LIKELY FILLED WITH THOUGHTS, EVEN CONCERNS ABOUT PRESENTS, THE MEALS, AND "A MILLION OTHER THINGS"? OR IT IS FILLED WITH THOUGHTS OF WHO REALLY IS COMING TO US?

HOW WE CAN PREPARE OUR "SPIRITUAL HOUSE" FOR THIS BABY CALLED JESUS, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD? PICTURE ALL THE PREPARATION THAT GOES ON BEFORE A BABY COMES HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL--THE FURNITURE, THE PAINT COLOR, THE "TOOLS OF THE TRADE" LIKE CLOTHES, DIAPERS, POWDER, OINTMENT, AND SO MUCH MORE!

THE QUESTION FOR EACH AND EVERYONE OF US TODAY AS WE HAVE GATHERED HERE TO BEGIN ANOTHER CHRISTMAS SEASON WITH ADVENT IS WHAT DOES ADVENT MEAN TO YOU? FOR A NUMBER OF US WE HAVE SEEN MORE THAN FEW DURING OUR LIFETIME, **BUT WHAT WILL BE DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS YEAR?** WILL WE JUST SKIP ADVENT AND "PREPARE" FOR CHRISTMAS, BECAUSE WE MAY CHOOSE NOT TO TAKE THE TIME FOR PREPARING AND CELEBRATING ANEW HIS BIRTH?

IF WE DO CHOOSE THAT PATH THEN THIS CHRISTMAS SEASON WILL BE LIKE MANY OTHERS AND NOTHING CHANGES. **BUT IF WE REALLY TAKE TIME TO PREPARE FOR JESUS, WHO IS THE "LIGHT OF THE WORLD" THEN THIS SEASON WILL BE DIFFERENT AND I WOULD SAY THE NEW YEAR MIGHT BE MUCH DIFFERENT FOR YOU TOO!!!**

WE AS GOD'S PEOPLE, **WE ARE PEOPLE OF FAITH AND HOPE. WITH HOPE COMES AN ANTICIPATION OF THINGS. ADVENT IS SUCH A TIME ON OUR FAITH JOURNEY.** A "HIGH" TIME OF WAITING FOR THAT BABY TO BE BORN FOR US THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE THEN AND WILL CONTINUE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE TODAY EVEN IN THIS HOUR OF WORSHIP AS WE COME TO HIS TABLE TO RECEIVE FORGIVENESS.

WE WILL SOON GO THROUGH THE COMMUNION LITURGY, WHICH IN ITSELF IS REALLY A PREPARATION TIME. OR IT IS JUST WORDS WE HAVE TO RECITE AND GET THROUGH SO WE CAN GET TO FELLOWSHIP? THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT WHEN I CHALLENGE YOU, AND ME TOO, TO FIND NOT JUST MEANING BUT **A NEW MEANING IN THE WORDS, THE SONGS, AND THE PRAYERS.** ASK GOD FOR SPIRITUAL "EYES" TO SEE AND EARS TO HEAR HIM WHEN HIS HOLY SPIRIT GENTLY WHISPERS TO OUR SPIRIT.

AS METHODISTS, YOU KNOW WE FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT. JOHN WESLEY AT ALDERSGATE THAT NIGHT WAS TOUCHED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT. *"In the evening I went unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter to nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death."*

WE TOO CAN "UNWILLINGLY" BE IN A PLACE WHERE GOD REALLY DESIRES US TO BE. IF WE LISTEN TO THAT VOICE AND NOT OURS THEN WE WILL BE SENT FORTH BY GOD TO DO SOMETHING NEW. **THERE IS RENEWAL IN OUR LIFE AND NO LONGER IS IT TO MERELY SURVIVE!!!! BUT THRIVE!!! IT IS GOD'S DESIRE FOR US NOT TO JUST SURVIVE, BUT THRIVE.**

WILL WE CONTINUE TO HAVE STRUGGLES? YES WE WILL, BUT WE KNOW WE WON'T WALK ALONE. ISAIAH 43:2
"When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you." **IT IS ONE OF PROMISES MADE BY GOD, HIMSELF, OUR GOD, AND HE PROMISED US A SAVIOR, WHICH WE HAVE!!!!**

THAT MY FRIEND IS WHAT ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS ARE AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE ALL ABOUT, NOT THE SHOPPING, THE MONEY SPENT, HOW MUCH FOOD WE DEVOUR OR CONCERNS AND WORRIES WE SEEM TO TAKE ON SO UNNECESSARILY. HEAR ME LADIES? AND MEN WE CAN ALWAYS SHOWS MORE INTEREST OR CONCERN, AFTER ALL WE ARE THEIR HELPMATE.

FAMILY IS IMPORTANT AS WE GATHER BY THE TREE OR A TABLE, BUT EVEN THE BEST THINGS CAN BLUR **WHAT IS THE REAL CELEBRATION – THE PREPARATION FOR AND THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST.** I SPOKE LAST WEEK OF **TRUST** IN GOD AND **BEING THANKFUL** FOR BEING OUR PROVIDER. GOD HAS GIVEN TO US FAMILY, AND SO MUCH MORE - JAMES IN HIS FIRST CHAPTER *"Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow."*

GOD HAS PROVIDED FOR GENERATIONS, FOR US, AND HE WILL TO FUTURE GENERATIONS. WE JUST CELEBRATED THANKSGIVING, DID WE GIVE THANKS TO HIM FOR WHO HE IS AND WHAT HE DOES FOR US? IF NOT, WHY NOT, FEARFUL OF OFFENDING SOMEONE? IN GIVING THANKS I BELIEVE WE BECOME THAT WITNESS OF OUR FAITH. EVEN WHEN IT IS A SHORT AND SIMPLE PRAYER OR A SONG LIKE JOHNNY APPLESEED - *"OH THE LORD IS GOOD TO ME"*

ARE WE PREPARED TO LET PEOPLE KNOW WHY THIS SEASON IS SO, SO IMPORTANT AND MEANINGFUL TO US? OR MAYBE IT HAS BECOME FOR US JUST A HYPED UP TIME OF THE YEAR AND LIKE EVERYONE ELSE WE GET "CAUGHT UP" IN THE TRAPPINGS?

TIME IS SOMETHING EVERYONE SAYS THEY DON'T HAVE ENOUGH OF, **BUT IF WE MAKE A PRIORITY OUT OF PREPARING FOR THE LIGHT, THE COMING OF JESUS, WE WILL DISCOVER WE WILL HAVE THE TIME.** THERE IS ADVENT MATERIAL TO HELP US, FROM A SINGLE VERSE TO A STORY FOR EACH DAY. TAKE THE TIME AND PREPARE FOR HIM.

WHAT DO WE DO IN PREPARATION FOR CHRISTMAS? THERE MAY BE LONGSTANDING TRADITIONS AND MANY MUNDANE THINGS WE PUT OFF UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE. I AM GOING TO GENERALIZE ON THESE PREPARATIONS - MAYBE SOME YOU DO OR SOME DON'T EVER DO.

FOR MANY THERE IS A CLEANING TO **PREPARE** THE HOUSE BEFORE ANY DECORATIONS ARE PUT UP. IN THE CLEANING PROCESS THERE MAYBE SOME REARRANGING OF THE FURNITURE. ROOM HAS TO BE MADE FOR THE DECORATIONS INCLUDING THE TREE. BOXES ARE OPENED, STRINGS OF LIGHTS ARE TESTED, GARLANDS FLUFFED UP. THERE MAY BE AN VERY OLD NATIVITY SET PUT IN A SPECIAL PLACE.

AFTER ALL THIS DECORATING, THOUGHTS TURN TO GIFTS. TRIPS ARE PLANNED TO GO TO THE MALL OR OTHER STORES DEPENDING ON GIFT LISTS. THERE IS AN EXCITEMENT WHEN WE FIND THAT GIFT ON OUR LIST AND IT IS AT A BARGAIN PRICE - ON SALE THAT DAY. OR JUST EVEN FINDING IT AFTER SEVERAL TRIPS THAT PREVIOUSLY HAD PRODUCED NOTHING.

(CABBAGE PATCH DOLLS STORY)

THERE MAYBE TIME-HONORED TRADITIONS LIKE BAKING. A SPECIAL RECIPE FOR A FRUITCAKE, A COOKIE MADE ONLY AT THIS TIME OF THE YEAR OR MAYBE A HOMEMADE FUDGE. THAT HAS A TASTE NOTHING ELSE COMPARES TO.

PREPARING FOR THE LIGHT DURING ADVENT AND THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST REQUIRES ACTIONS. INSTEAD OF CLEANING THE HOUSE IN PREPARATION FOR THE DECORATIONS **HOW ABOUT “CLEANING” OF THE HEART?** IN MATTHEW 5:8 JESUS TALKED OF HOW BLESSED OR HAPPY ARE THE PURE IN HEART FOR THEY WILL SEE GOD. THERE ARE DAYS WHEN THE THINGS COMING FROM THE HEART AREN'T WHAT WE COULD CALL “PURE”!! JESUS TOLD US IT IS OUT OF HEART BAD THINGS COME, **NOT** WHAT WENT INTO THE MOUTH.

WHAT CAN WE DO IN PREPARATION – NOT A SINGLE THING! IT IS GOD THAT DOES THE WORK. REMEMBER WHEN DAVID IN PSALM 51 VERSE 10 CRIES OUT TO GOD “*Create in me a pure heart and renew a right spirit within me.*” GOD DID JUST THAT FOR DAVID AND WE ARE NO DIFFERENT! **IF WE CRY OUT TO GOD FROM OUR HEART, BE PREPARED TO CHANGE.**

ONE OF THE OLDEST PLEAS IN THE CHURCH IS “*LORD HAVE MERCY ON ME*” ARE WE SO PERFECT THAT WE DON'T NEED TO ASK GOD TO HAVE MERCY ON US? IN THIS ADVENT SEASON BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF, **YOU, I, ALL OF US CAN BE BETTER PEOPLE AND WITH GOD'S MERCY, LOVE, AND FORGIVENESS WE WILL BE BETTER PEOPLE.**

NOW JUST LIKE THE HOUSE BEING CLEANED AND READY FOR DECORATING, **SO WHEN GOD CLEANS OUR HEART WE ARE READY FOR “DECORATING”.** THERE IS A VERSE IN EZEKIEL ABOUT GIVING US A NEW HEART OF FLESH TO REPLACE THAT HEART OF STONE. I AM REMINDED OF A SONG IN OUR HYMNAL “SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL” WITH THE LINE “ALL MY CONFUSION HE UNDERSTOOD, ALL I HAD TO OFFER WAS BROKENNESS AND STRIFE, BUT HE MADE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL OF MY LIFE” AGAIN, **WE DON'T HAVE TO JUST SURVIVE THIS LIFE FROM DAY TO DAY. GOD LOVES US AND WANTS US TO THRIVE!!!**

JUST LIKE WE REARRANGED THE HOUSE, GOD THIS ADVENT SEASON DESIRES US TO MAKE ROOM FOR HIS SON AND SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM AND ALL THESE THINGS WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU. BEST OFFER WE HAVE EVER HAD!!!

IN CLOSING, LAST ON THE LIST OF PREPARATION IS THE GIVING AND RECEIVING OF GIFTS. THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING WE ARE PREPARING FOR WHEN WE PREPARE FOR THE LIGHT. WE HEARD IN THE READING FROM ISAIAH THOSE WALKING IN DARKNESS HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT AND WE MUST LET JESUS INTO ANY AREA OF DARKNESS WE HAVE IN US. **THAT IS WHY IN PREPARING FOR THE LIGHT IT SHOULD BE A TIME OF GREAT JOY AND GREETED WITH ANTICIPATION EACH YEAR. IF WE ARE “BLINDED” BY THE TRAPPINGS OF THE SEASON, THE WORRIES AND ALL THAT, THEN WE WILL BE WALKING IN THE DARKNESS, MISSING THE “LIGHT OF WORLD” - JESUS CHRIST.**

TODAY WE WILL COME TO HIS TABLE, TO EAT THE BREAD AND DRINK THE JUICE. ADVENT, START RIGHT HERE AT HIS TABLE, **BEGIN PREPARING FOR THE LIGHT WITH THE CLEANSING OF FORGIVENESS AND THE RE-ARRANGING TO MAKE ROOM.** GOD WILL DO THE REST SO THAT YOU WILL IN A NEW WAY BE PREPARED FOR THE LIGHT, JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.