

## The Road to Bethlehem: Time to Hit the Road

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

The First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018

Isaiah 2:1-5/ Luke 1:5-25

I am so very happy you all are here. Today, we begin our journey to Bethlehem. I love Advent. The services are a bit more formal and introspective, and, though we resist singing Christmas carols, at least for a couple of weeks, we still get a hint of the music we love in order to build our anticipation.



I love Advent, but, at the risk of sounding like a Scrooge, I'll admit that I'm not so crazy about Christmas. Oh, I love the Christmas Eve services, and I hope to see you and your family at one or both of those beautiful times. The 5:00 service will be a family affair, designed with our children in mind, and the 11:00 service will have candles, and carols, and communion, and our hearts will burst open when we sing "Silent Night" at midnight, just as the day we await finally arrives.

That is the ideal journey to Bethlehem, and I love it ... but then my love affair ends because, for the past three decades, I have led a midnight service then, as you make your way home and the warmth leaves the sanctuary, I usually close up the building and head home. By then, it is nearly 1 a.m.

That would be fine, except, this year, I have to get up at 5 a.m. to catch a plane to Georgia. I will meet my daughters in Atlanta, and we will rent a car and drive to my parent's home, which is three hours south, and have dinner with dozens of nieces and nephews, and



great nieces and nephews, and a few people I've never seen before. By the time the children unwrap their presents, the greatest gift I could get will be a good night's sleep.

Of course, like many of you, this is the day when my heart aches most deeply for the loved one for whom I can no longer buy gifts and exchange kisses. Many of you know just what I mean, and that probably makes the day bittersweet for you too.

To me, that makes the Advent journey even more precious.

My family wasn't very affluent, so we often piled into our car and took road trips. Maybe that's why I love to do that today. I learned very young that I might not enjoy where we were going, but, if I looked out the window and read the signs, I could talk my father into stopping along the way to see an alligator farm or the world's largest pumpkin. The destination might not be fun, but the journey can be a blast.

It wasn't until many years later that I discovered that a number of feminist theologians and philosophers have tried to teach us that *the journey is our home*. As children, we were anxious for Christmas, and, back then, it seemed like it would never get here. Today, it seems to come around with stunning frequency and alacrity.

One lesson we mature ones need to remember, especially in this season, is the journey may be much more precious than the destination. We get so focused on where we are going in life that we forget that where we ARE is holy ground.



Hanukkah begins tonight. As our modern lesson sought to teach our children, Hanukkah is a commemoration of the victory by the wildly outnumbered Hebrews against a foreign army of oppressors in 160 BC.

When the Hebrews rededicated the temple in Jerusalem, it required lighting a lamp known as a menorah. According to the story of Hanukkah, there was only enough oil for the menorah to remain lit for one day. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days, long enough for the temple to be re-supplied and the holy lamp to remain burning.



Today, over the eight nights of Hanukkah, Jewish families will light candles on a menorah; one candle is lit on each successive night until all eight are lit and burning brightly. For our Jewish sisters and brothers tonight begins a celebration of the coming of light that dispels the darkness.

For pagans, this is the season in which we move toward the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. They will have a great celebration to welcome back the light.

As Christians, we light our wreath symbolizing that, with each passing week, the light grows as we move closer and closer to the coming blaze that is the Light of the world. Advent reminds us that all of life is a journey of hope toward infinite light.



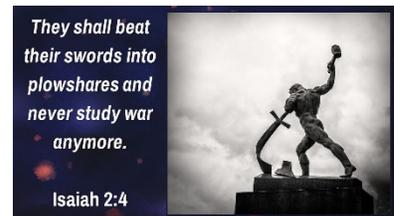
Of course, December 25 is not the actual birthday of the historical Jesus. No one knows that date, but the early church chose this date for the precise reason that pagans still celebrate it. We all travel through the night to the Light. Hence, the

first candle we light on our wreath is the candle of hope. Despite the night, we still believe in the light because of the gift of hope.

During a dark time in the history of the Jews, Christians believe a messenger was sent, first to Zechariah and then to Mary. We will get to Mary's part of the story in the weeks to come, but, today, we heard the promise of the coming of John the Baptist. Like Advent, John came to prepare for the coming of the Light.



In the same way, that beautiful prophesy we heard from Isaiah is certainly not a reality, but it paints a picture of what the world would be like if we chose light over darkness. It describes our hope and dreams for a world in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.



If our hope for the reign of Light is real then it must change our values and our behavior, our attitudes and our conduct. As people whose journey is toward the light, our lives **should be** different from those who journey without eternal hope. Unless it changes our lives, hope is nothing but magical thinking that somehow peace will come, things will get better, we will get better.

I believe you are here this morning because you are people of *eucatastrophe*. That is a word that J.R.R. Tolkien made up.

All of us understand what a catastrophe is, but a eucatastrophe is a **wonderful upheaval**, a good convulsion of circumstances. Tolkien gives a great example:

*"Gandalf! [Sam said] I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?"*

*"A great Shadow has departed," said Gandalf. Then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, pure sound of merriment, for days upon days. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known. He cried. "I feel, I feel"—he waved his arms in the air—"I feel like spring after winter. I feel like trumpets and harps and all the songs I ever heard."*

That's the definition of eucatastrophe: "Everything sad is going to come untrue." On the longest of nights, the light returns to us. Or, as the Psalmist says, "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

Sometimes we journey in the night, but Advent comes to remind us that we journey with hope toward the light.

And so, People of Hope, let's hit the road!