

Advent Message, 2020:

Evening shadows softly fall.

Hear, O Christ, our vesper call.

With your presences, bless us all.

Come, O Christ! Come, O Christ!

*Come, while we in silence wait!**

We're quickly approaching the shortest night of the year. Have you noticed how the annual Winter Solstice, is almost upon us? With sunset occurring around 5:00pm EDT and darkness reigning in between 6-6:30? I know it impacts my mother when she looks outside and tells me how "*its late*" and "*time to go to bed*" by 8:00 pm. While many theological traditions have already started celebrating the "Christmas Season," we find ourselves sometimes literally, "locked down" and unable to worship-in-community, let-alone able to leave our homes. Coming from a liturgical tradition, a cacophony of noise competes for our attention this-time-of-year which often makes it impossible to hear Advent's simple message. Amidst all of our preparations for Christmas and/or other seasonal holidays it's easy to miss Advent's essence: God came down! That God prefers to live with us in spite of our anger, violence, political differences, our Covid-19 shaming, or our lack of love for one another ... that is ... for "*our neighbor*"!

Prayers are whispered in the night.

Hearts are struggling t'ward the light.

With your touch restore our sight.

Come, O Christ! Come, O Christ!

*Come, while we in darkness wait!**

The local Thanksgiving week paper highlighted how the number of Covid-19 cases in Garrett County having increased from 40-50% with the announcement of this area's first two Covid-19 deaths. How, these two Garrett County residents had been living in long-term care facilities just east of here in Alleghany county. This week's headlines relate how Garrett County's fatalities have increased to eight. Just yesterday, the Accident Parish mourned the loss of one of these eight, an elderly brother-in-Christ who had been living at Goodwill in Grantsville, MD. My brother and sister-in-law (*from OH*) were both COVID-19 positive and in the hospital through the middle of November. My oldest brother and his wife (*from MI*) tested positive during Thanksgiving week. While my elder brother is now at home feeling weak, his wife is still being treated for COVID-related pneumonia in a hospital. I've subsequently spoken with several others who are self-quarantining because a wife, child, or loved one, perhaps due to caring for someone, subsequently tested positive. Officials have talked about reducing the quarantine time from 14 to as few as 7-10 days. Unfortunately, that has yet to be officially implemented. So many people are literally stuck. Waiting for time to pass, waiting for test results to arrive, or waiting for both. Waiting for their own knowledge or perhaps simply for others protection. All this going on while some have recently decided to serve as "*moral police*" by criticizing and shaming those unfortunate enough to have already suffered under Covid-19 once already. These self-appointed "*judges*" might suppose how those who've endured Covid-19 had, broken the rules! How they had been careless about social distancing or showed little concern for the health and safety of others! Some have even taken the view that anyone diagnosed with Covid-19 remain, "*dirty or unsafe*" even well after their physical recovery.

Activity of this type has resulted with some sufferers actually concealing their diagnosis *or* in delayed testing which may lead into more suffering or deaths. Behavior which leaves, sufferers and those around them, literally *waiting in darkness*.

*Starlight shines from heaven's dome
On earth's wand'ers where they roam.
Lead, dear Lord, your lost ones home.
Come, O Christ! Come, O Christ!
Come, while we with longing wait!**

Yet, in this broken world ... the cacophony continues ... even while subdued by 2020's Covid-19. The Town of Oakland recently decided to "*forgo the official tree-lighting ceremony*" at the tree in front of the B&O Train Museum in favor of partnering with the Garrett Regional Medical Center to make that tree more beautiful with 2,000 more new lights. The annual Soup and Santa night has been replaced with three separate "*drive-thru*" events. While in Oakland, Santa will be found "hanging out at the Front Page Stage from noon to 2:00pm each Saturday before Christmas for a "*drive through*" visit. This year the House of Hope's 42nd annual "Food Drive" has been modified for the acceptance of monetary donations only. "Bucks for Hope" featured masked volunteers carrying "**Buckets of Hope**" to waiting vehicles. In Grantsville, for the first time in 36 years, "*Christmas in the Village*" has been canceled. In response to this summer's straight-line winds which destroyed the Spruce Forest Artisan Village trees and the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic, no "*open house*" will occur. The only event scheduled here is a tree-lighting on one of the few remaining spruce trees. The luminaries which until this year have decorated the entire village during its annual "open house," will only be placed across the Casselman Bridge thanks to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Finally, while lights have already appeared across Garrett County, this year a new holiday light display will be held from December 4th- Jan 2nd in Broadford Park, for a fee.

*Save us, Lord, from wakefulness,
Torn by grief or tossed by stress.
Fold us in your faithfulness.
Come, O Christ! Come, O Christ!
Come, while we in darkness wait!**

Just as Advent reminds us of "*Christ's first coming*" in "*the incarnation,*" so does it remind us how, "*Christ will come again!*" Just as we live between "the Kingdom of the World" and "the Kingdom of God," so do **we** live between "*the Incarnation*" and Christ's second coming, "*... in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels...*" (*Mark 13: 26*). While Christ's first coming teaches us about God being here, God will return as we ... **let God in!** As we ... let God into our political, economic, and judicial systems. As we ... let God into our relationships along with those who need redemption. As we wait, like the remnant of Israel waited, like the prophets, and like those in exile waited. Just as Mary and Joseph waited, just as the poor, the imprisoned, the oppressed, and all those others who in darkness wait. Just as all those who wait for the dawning light of a loving and faithful God!

Pastor Rick

*"*Evenings Shadows Softly Fall*" lyrics, Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr, GIA Publications, Inc