

2020 has been a very different kind of year. And here we are in a very different kind of Advent. There are only three and a half weeks until Christmas. But it will undoubtedly be a very different kind of Christmas.

Usually this season is characterized by the warm glow of holiday cheer versus the darkness and cold outside. December is a dark month. It's the darkest month of the year in the northern hemisphere. The days are short, and the nights are long. As the darkness around us deepens, we long for the light. So as a culture, we try to fight the darkness. We light extra candles, and get a fire going in the fireplace. We cover our houses with extra lights, inside and outside.

Because we know that darkness is all around us. Not just physical darkness, but a deeper darkness in 2020. I don't have to tell you that there is much in this terrible year that has been dark, and uncertain, and frightening all around us.

This time of year is a season of paradox: light versus darkness, hope versus fearfulness, peace on earth good will towards men versus almost everything else out there.

And yet this is Advent. This is the season when we are encouraged to put on the armor of light, to forsake our fears, to trust in the living God. By doing this we can look forward to the coming of Christmas. We can prepare our hearts to welcome the baby born in the manger. We can prepare our hearts to meet our Lord when he comes again in glorious majesty. We can live in faith and hope, and not in fear.

What is it we're hoping for? What's our deepest longing? We want to love and be loved.

At their best, that's what all our Christmas gifts are about. Yes, I know we sometimes give gifts out of a sense of obligation. But at their best, Christmas gifts are about love.

I believe that we're trying to do something with Christmas gifts that reflects a deep longing we have, to let those close to us know that we love them. These are tokens of love. They help cement the bonds of our relationships.

We want to let our loved ones know we love them. An outward gift is a token of this deeper desire, to love and be loved.

And yet, we're imperfect and flawed. Our relationships and our families are imperfect and flawed. Thus, the love we give and want to give one another is imperfect and flawed as well.

I believe that's why people are often disappointed after the holidays. We want so much to love and be loved. And yet, our human love is not perfect, it's not enough.

And that's why the season of Advent is so important to us during this time of the year. Advent reminds us of a deeper longing. Human love can never be enough. Human love, human things can never satisfy us fully.

St. Augustine speaks of a God-shaped hole that nothing else can fill. He famously says, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

In a more extended dialogue, St. Augustine pushes this idea further. He proposes a thought experiment:

"Imagine God appeared to you and said, 'I'll make a deal with you if you wish. I'll give you anything and everything you ask: pleasure, power, honor, wealth, freedom, even peace of mind and a good conscience. Nothing will be a sin; nothing will be forbidden; and nothing will be impossible for you. You will never be bored and you will never die. Only...you shall never see my face.'

And then he asks,

"Did you notice that unspeakable chill in your deepest heart at those last words? Did your surface desires leap after the first part of God's deal and your deepest desire freeze in standstill shock at 'you shall never see my face'? Your surface mind, which is in touch with your surface desires, may not admit it, but your deepest mind, which knows your deepest desires, knows it: you want God more than everything else in the world."¹

It's a powerful image. Our surface minds may fixate on other things, things of this world. But our deepest minds know our need for God, our need to know God, our need to love and be loved by God.

And Christianity proclaims that the way to know God most fully is in the person of Jesus Christ. God becoming flesh. God becoming one of us. That's what we're preparing for. That's what we're longing for. That's what Advent is all about.

You hear it in our Psalm this morning. Psalm 80 expresses a deep longing for God. Psalm 80 is a very honest and poetic prayer to God for help in the midst of an uncertain and frightening world. It's a powerful cry to God:

*Shepherd of Israel, listen;
lead Joseph as a flock.
You are enthroned on the cherubim.
Shine on Ephraim, on Benjamin, Manasseh.
Rouse yourself in your power,
and come to rescue us.
God of heaven and earth, restore us;
let your face shine brightly and help us.*

Listen to those requests addressed to God in this Psalm. They are the cries of people in darkness who need God's light. They are the cries of people in dark times who want God to act:

'Hear us; shine forth; rouse up your might; come to our help; bring us back; let your face shine on us.'

¹ As relayed by Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*

That's the request in Psalm 80: 'Please listen to us God. Show us your glory. Show us your power. Help us. We know you have the power. Use it to rescue us.' It's a very human cry.

*Rouse yourself in your power,
and come to rescue us.*

'Please get moving God, we're tired of waiting.'

We long for God like a child waiting for Christmas to come. Conscious or not, it is our deepest spiritual desire. Whether we admit or not, being in God's presence is the greatest spiritual desire any of us can ever have. That's what we long for every Advent.

In 2020, times are dark. In the midst of dark times, it's important to bring to mind the way God has acted in the past. Even when things appear dark and threatening, we can confidently pray for God to act. God may not always act as quickly as we would like. We may have to wait. And God may act in ways that we do not expect. But he has acted in the past. And we can be confident that he will act in the future. And, most of all, we can be confident of God's love for us through the person of Jesus Christ.

That's what we're preparing for. That's what Advent is about, preparing for Christmas, preparing for the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. In dark times, we can pray with confidence, knowing God has acted in the past, and will act again. We can pray with confidence knowing God loves us.

In 2020, may God hear our cries.

May God make his face known to all of us.

May his light shine brightly on us and help us.