

First Sunday of Advent

December 1, 2019

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Isaiah 9: 1-2, 6-7

Luke 2: 6-14

Hanging the Greens

Can you remember that one gift you waited for as a child? The extra special present that would be wrapped under the tree awaiting you on Christmas morning. One of my Confirmands asked me this questions this past week. And as I walked down memory lane, one very special gift did come to mind...the Barbie Jeep Power Wheels Beach Buggy!



Link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsZNss6MWdY> Play Video

This was my dream to have my own Barbie Jeep to cruise around my driveway...pick up my little sister and find our own adventures in the driveway... we couldn't really go anywhere else, but we would make it our own jungle adventure. And so as the weeks leading up to Christmas slowly passed by, this commercial would play on the loop in between episodes of Barney. We were truly kids of the 90s. We were tormented by the wait, not knowing that our parents had already hidden this extra special gift away in the garage.

We can all imagine the roar of excitement on Christmas morning, because you've seen it in your own kids, or you've been that kid who found their extra special gift under the tree on Christmas morning. Needless to say, Barbie Jeep was used for many years until she found Barbie Jeep heaven and eventually was replaced by a real Jeep that went a lot farther than just the driveway.

As children we all began our Christmas experience with the anticipation of toys similar to my story, but at some point there is a shift, and Christmas becomes something much more. The wait isn't for a special toy anymore but for a child to be born. A child promised to change the world.

This shift, in thought and practice occurred for me after the summer of 2014. During my four summers of college, I attended a mission trip with my youth group to Bluefields, Nicaragua. During those four summers a bond was formed, a mentorship that I would hold on to as I began to answer the call of ordination. Each summer my friends and eventually siblings as well enjoyed the unique culture of Bluefields, the exquisite cuisine, and the pure laughter of children running through the streets. Our mission was simple, to create a bond with people of another culture and witness God's mercy as it unfolded. We didn't have to build houses or move heavy loads, but we simply fed the children and played games in the streets. I had been on mission trips similar to WoodsWork, building homes for those in desperate need, and was moved by those experiences, but something was very different in Bluefields...all that was required of me was to offer myself.

As I returned each year I saw the familiar faces of children who'd grown in the past year, the warm smile of the orphanage director who made the best banana bread, the soothing sounds of the waves crashing against the rocks by the children's center.

Each year we spent a week exploring the city's most impoverished neighborhoods, providing food to hundreds of children ensuring that they had at least one meal a day, witnessing extreme poverty, and worshiping in unusual settings. At the closing of my fourth summer in Bluefields, I had become very close to the director of the children's center and orphanage, and local bishop of the Moravian Church. Before I left, I began a conversation with these two role models of mine that would unfold into a monumental experience. Although my church did not have plans to return for a fifth summer, I would fly solo to Bluefields and live in the orphanage with the children as their house mom for a whole summer. While my parents couldn't fully understand that to me this wasn't just a mission trip, these were people who became my family. And so, in the summer of 2014 I packed my one bag and flew down to a familiar coastal city where I would create a new home for myself.

That summer was not all smooth sailing, but I walked away with a clear call to ordained ministry. This story is great and all, but you may be wondering what about the Christmas story? Well it is because of that summer that my understanding of Christmas shifted. I didn't want to wait for a new expensive gift under the tree anymore. What I was waiting for was the light to appear from the darkness. The sign of a child being born. Spending a few months with nothing more than the clothes on my back and the Bible in hand, truly taught me the full meaning of Christmas, and I was waiting for it that year. I was waiting for Christ to be born anew in my life. Let's hear from the prophet Isaiah about how the people of Judah awaited a similar hope.

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Isaiah prophesized that a child would be born who would bring light to the darkness, eliminate gloom, a Prince of Peace. This prophesy resonated with the people of Judah because they were covered in darkness sitting in a deep gloom. In Isaiah 8, just before this passage, the people were warned of the invasion of the Assyrians. This invasion would be terrible for those northern regions of the Promised Land, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Isaiah tried to warn the people but they would not listen. They stumbled in the darkness and were overcome by the Assyrian Empire. Judgement would fall on the Northern ten tribes of Israel and they would be completely destroyed, with only a remnant remaining that would be carted off to far-flung places in the empire. Understanding that the people of Judah were devastated and almost completely vanquished, Isaiah sent them a message of hope. He told them that their former life of gloom would be drowned by the glorious light. A child would be born, given to us...a child of righteousness and justice. And so we begin to hear in our Christmas story the message of hope, peace, joy, and love for those who wait in faith.

If you dig deep into your memories of Sunday school where someone first taught you the stories of the Bible, you may begin to see a connection woven throughout scripture: we are waiting in hope, peace, joy, and love for everlasting life. The four candles we light during advent tell us of these familiar symbols of Christmas, these symbols that are woven in scripture.

These familiar passages we read throughout the Advent season, like this passage from Isaiah, fill us with a sense of wonder as we wait for the child to be born. We begin to see decorations emerge from the attic, lights twinkling in the trees on Main Street, ribbons wrapped around presents underneath the tree...all symbols of the Christmas season. And some of us may feel overwhelmed at times by the commercial season of Christmas as it distracts our attention from the true meaning of Christmas. But I want to let you in on a secret...these symbols of Christmas, even these symbols used in a commercial way, each remind us of the child to be born.

I came across this beautiful service called the Hanging of the Greens. A service when the church takes time to decorate their sanctuary, their doors, their sidewalks, and hallways in the Christmas spirit as a way of worship. I was so intrigued by this notion of worship being an act of decorating, that I thought I would bring it to Woods. And so, as my helpers come forward please prayerfully participate in the decorating of our sanctuary for Christ's birth.

Emily, Caroline and Juliana walk down the aisles with the three candles and meet in the middle of the chancel front step and place the candles on the table.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who have lived in the land of deep darkness on them light has shined. Isaiah 9:2.

Candles are the reminders of Jesus Christ as the light of the world, our symbol of hope. As His light shines in the darkness it brings light to those who follow him. The life of Christ is spread outward as each Christian uses their life, love, and faith to express Christ's light to the world. We place these candles in the windows of our homes to recognize Jesus as God's light in the world and to recognize how we too become God's light in the world. As John's Gospel says,

Jesus is the true light, the light of the world, the one who dispels darkness forever.

We carry the light of Christ within us, not just through the Christmas season, but year round and invite others to come out of the darkness.

Jenna comes forward down the center aisle with the cedar arrangement. Place it on the right side of the table.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. Colossians 3:15.

The cedar was revered as the tree of excellence and endurance. It also signified immortality and was used for purification. We place this cedar on the table as a sign of Christ and the kind of power he displayed; not the power of might but the power of transforming peace...for we were to receive a child who would be born of righteousness and justice. As we contemplate his call to justice and peace, we seek to purify our hearts and renew a right spirit within us.

Caroline and Juliana come forward holding the garland and hook it into the hooks on the table.

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1: 8-9.

The Advent custom of decorating with evergreen branches comes to us from the peasants of the Middle Ages who believed that preparations should be made for the coming of Jesus. On the first Sunday of Advent each family would gather evergreens and place them near the hearths in their home. We continue that tradition by hanging the greens in our congregational home, the sanctuary. The evergreen reminds us of God's abiding love in Jesus Christ our source for endless joy.

Emily and Jenna lower the two wreathes from the top platform in the sacristy.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believed in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16.

Holly with its green leaves and red berries has long been a popular Christmas decoration. It has been used as a gift to friends to express good will and to wish good fortune. The early Christians developed their own symbolism, holding that the crown of thorns was made of holly leaves. Thus the wreath was begun as a symbol of the crown of thorns. The holly in the wreath symbolizes, in its circular form, never-ending love and everlasting life in Christ. Therefore, the holly symbolizes the love in our Christmas season.

Here in our newly decorated space we almost forgot the Advent wreath as our constant reminder that something is happening and something more is still to come. The candles are arranged in a circle to remind us of the continuous power of God, which knows neither beginning nor ending. There is also symbolism in the colors of the candles. The three blue candles symbolize the

coming of Christ from the royal line of David. He is coming as the King of Kings as well as the Prince of Peace. The pink candle is to be lighted on the third Sunday of the Advent season. This candle represents joy. The large white candle in the center is known as the Christ candle, and points to Jesus as the Christ, the Light of the world. In progression the lighting of the candles of the Advent wreath each Sunday symbolize various aspects of our waiting experience.

And so as we witness the symbols of Christmas emerging over the next few weeks, be reminded of the coming of Christ. Each of us may be waiting for our Barbie Jeep, but there is always something greater to be expected as we wait for the child to be born. Amen