

First Sunday of Advent: Hope

An essential part of the ministry of a parish priest is to care for people in hospitals. I want to begin today by speaking about one of the rooms in the hospital, the critical care waiting room. This is the room where family and friends wait while the doctors care for their loved ones who have suffered a devastating stroke, a serious heart attack, a horrible car accident or some other catastrophic event. I hope you have never had occasion to be in that waiting room, but if you have, you know that it is a place very different from any other place in the world. The people who wait there are bound together like no other people in the world.

Family members and friends can't do enough for each other. No one is proud. No one stands on ceremony or protocol. Petty disputes and hurts are nowhere to be found. Perhaps there are several patients whose family and friends are waiting in that room. These complete strangers feel bound in their shared hope for their loved ones. Class and race melt away. Each person in that room is a parent or spouse or child or close friend of the suffering one first. He or she is a white, black or Asian, a blue collar or white collar worker second. Everyone in the waiting room pulls for each other. If one family receives good news, there is hope and joy for all. If another family hears sad news, everyone in the room feels their grief.

In the critical care waiting room, the world changes. Vanity and pretense vanish. The entire universe is focused on the doctor's next report. All eyes continually glance at the door. The critical care waiting room is a place of hoping. It is a place of anticipating, a place of expecting. It is a place of Advent.

We live in this waiting room. We keep an eye out for the doctor, the Divine Healer, to come. We hope to experience his good news. We long for him to say, "the patient, your loved one, is fine. He or she is going to recover, is going to live."

Who is this Loved One about whom we are so concerned? The Loved One is not another person. The Loved One is that part of each of us and all of us that is right when all else seems wrong. The Loved One is that which is good when all else seems malicious. The Loved One is that within us that is spiritual in a materialistic world. The Loved One is our sharing in the Life of Jesus Christ himself. The Loved One is our soul. But the Loved One is in critical care. Evil forces are trying to destroy this presence. We sit in the waiting room of life, longing for the Divine Doctor to come and tell us that the presence of the Lord is well and strong within us and among us. We call out, "Come! Rend the heavens and come! We are the clay. You are the potter. Mold us back into your own. Come!"

And so we watch. We watch for the Divine Healer to come and lead us into His Love. We watch for the times, more than we could imagine, when God extends His Love to us. We watch for the times when we can serve His Love by serving others. We watch for the opportunities to unite ourselves closer to His Love through prayer and sacrifice. We wait. We watch. We watch for opportunities to grow. Advent, the

time of watching, reminds us that our entire lives must be a watching for ways that we can grow more spiritual, grow closer to Christ.

We have to watch. If we don't prepare for Christ's coming, if we don't live our lives in such a way that we are always open to His Presence, then we will be caught napping. Perhaps the end of our personal world will come before the end of the universe. It makes no difference. We have to be prepared for Christ. We have to watch.

We sit in the critical care waiting room of life longing to live with the Loved One. We need the Lord. We need Him in our lives to make sense of life. Without Him, our lives are chaos. Without the Lord our lives are a mad dashing about from place to place, person to person, doing for the sake of doing, wandering aimlessly only because everyone else is wandering aimlessly. But with the Lord, sin, chaos, is conquered. With the Lord, everything falls into place. Even the most difficult experiences of our lives, even suffering and death have meaning when they become an expression and renewal of the life and death of Jesus Christ.

We long for our Lord's Presence. If we deny this need, this necessity for God to be in our lives, then we chance becoming useless shells, Christians on the outside, but not much on the inside. But if we fight off our inclination to embrace chaos, if we fight off being overwhelmed by the fluff of the world and allow our need for Christ to transform our lives, then we can be what he created us to be, images of His Love on earth. We can be whole. We can be Christians.

Advent is the season of hope. The promise of the prophets will be fulfilled. The Messiah will come to return the world to God's original plan. Our thirst for the Messiah will be quenched by the celebration of his birth and life within our own lives. We wait. We watch. We prepare to celebrate.

To the extent that we do this well, to the extent that our lives are a celebration of the presence of Christ in the world, to that extent, our entire lives are a celebration of Christmas.