

"In him was life, and the life was the light of men"  
John 1:4

12-17-78  
Beautiful things can happen during these days, People get excited about Christmas. By this 3rd Sunday of Advent, I'm sure that some of you have completed your gift selections...and now, with the children you can relax and anticipate. It is a beautiful time. An air of congeniality overtakes us.

Part of the beauty of Advent is its change of pace. It is a penitential season... and is a time of reflection, soul-searching and examination. Advent ought to lead us to reset some of our priorities. But we're not used to a change of pace. We are not always ready for mind-blowing personal reflection and meditation. In an age when background music is piped practically everywhere, it is even hard to find a quiet place anymore. This is the age of distraction. Things are not arranged to promote inner reflection.

We need some outside helps and reminders to guide us. This morning we will use our Advent wreath for that purpose. The wreath is a beautiful decoration in itself. But it is a teacher too, a teacher about life. It teaches us about

1. Life and God
2. Life and ourselves

1. Look at the wreath. One of the obvious things is that it has green branches as part of its makeup. Green is the color of life. We are barely into the winter, but we already miss the greenery. Many of our friends are off to southern climates to enjoy the green again.

A. This greenery teaches us that God is the source of life. The text says: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men". The idea, the gift of life is God's. The human body is a symphony of chemicals blending, glands secreting, blood circulating, limbs moving, and a brain controlling and giving messages. All that is woven together to make up what we call life. Life is God's work and his big idea. The wreath teaches us that life is never a matter-of-fact proposition. It is an exciting reality, something to move us ~~and~~ to praise and awe.

If life is God's idea, he wants to keep it going. He wants us to care for our bodies. He wants us to re-create thru recreation. God so favors life that he wants us not only to care for our own but for other people as well. They have life, too, and God calls us to keep it going, especially among the outcasts, the ill, and the disinherited.

Green is the color of life. It's God's color. Thank God for all of life, for the idea of it, and for the good life he's given you.

B. Now the Advent wreath tells us something else about God. He is not only the source and giver of life, but is also the source and giver of eternal life as well. Note the shape of the wreath. It is a circle, and there is no beginning and end. That is God's big idea, too . . . the idea of eternal life. In fact it is such a big idea that it is too big for us to understand. It is a mystery. Many people marvel at life, and rightly so. But eternal life is a bigger marvel. Perhaps that is because eternal life is a gift, something that God gives us. Without God, man dies and that is that. But the Bible teaches us something new. We hear about eternal life and it is always a gift. Paul talks about "The gift of eternal life".

God fashioned this gift for us. "In Christ was life, and the life was the light of men" The little baby became a man, and died, and rose again. And he promised that we who believe would be heirs of eternal life. It is ours from God thru Christ as a gift. And eternal life is one of God's biggest ideas. Praise him.

2. Now just as the advent wreath teaches us some truths about life and God, so it teaches us some truths about life and ourselves.

A. It teaches us for example that our life has a way of slowly drying up whenever we are removed from the main stem of the vine, Jesus Christ. Jesus said: "I am the vine, you



are the branches; apart from me you can do nothing". 4  
Many, of course, are trying to make it thru life without  
Christ - perhaps you are one of them - but it is futile.  
Our greenery on the wreath is artificial but look at the  
tree. Cut just a day or two ago it is fresh. But by  
Christmas time it will be dry, the needles will be falling,  
and the branches crisp and brittle. You see, it is no  
longer connected to its source of life.

Make no mistake about it. Our lives can dry up like  
that tree will. Perhaps your life is already dry and bor-  
ing. Our lives dry up thru many ways. But nearly always  
there are choices involved. Christmas is a good time to  
take a look at your choices. Are you choosing only things,  
or are you choosing life and peace and Christ. For too  
many Christmas is just a mood. They choose all those things  
that get them in the mood. Usually it is hollow, for there  
is little life in it. A modern poet dexribes our society

We are hollow men  
We are stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas  
Our dried voices, when  
We whispered together,  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry sellar  
Shape without form, shade without color  
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion

(T S Eliot)

During this Advent, let it be ourspecial care to

choose those paths and those things which spell life, not dryness and death. 5

Let us note, too, that branches dry up slowly. Gradually, even imperceptibly. On December 31st that tree will probably look green. It will have the appearance of life. But come up here then and jostle a branch and see what happens. The needles will crumble and fall.

And people are like that, many of them. They slowly drift away from the life God has to give. Thru a 1000 little daily choices they squeeze out God's life-giving presence. No one often renounces God, our flight from God is not specific and deliberate. But slowly and one by one we make those choices that deny God and his will in our lives. We invest less and less in faith. We desposit less and less for faith's growth. Oh, we keep the outer appearance of greenness and vitality. But the inner life, the vital link with a living and loving Father is broken, and we know it. Or we painfully discover it, especially when a crisis backs up to our dryness. Things then crumble into a million pieces, like a dried up Christmas tree on Dec 31.

Advent is a time for us to be discovering and facing the condition of our inner space. Make an inner space journey these days. Where thre isdryness and lack of life, come back to the Lord Jesus Christ, and start living the fresh life of one of God(s renewed persons.

B. Finally this Advent wreath teaches us something else about ourselves. It teaches us that the direction of a persons life ought always be forward. Advent teaches us to anticipate, to look forward, to never lose hope, to never falter in faith. You see, the action of lighting the candles on the wreath is a symbol of anticipation. Anticipation, faith, is truly the Christian stance.

Helen Keller once said: "Light a candle instead of cursing the darkness" Yes, keep lighting candles, anticipate the future, wait for God. Another saint in the OT said it too. "Tho he slay me, yet will I trust him".

Many today only curse the darkness. Christians light candles. They affirm that God always comes. In the midnight hour, when all is darkest, the almighty Word descends from his throne. The light appears in the darkness. Darkness gives way to God's presence in the manger.

This is the advent wreath, it teaches us about life - God's life and our own, let us light it with meaning and insight...and with faith.