

We can be so focused on Christmas that Advent gets overlooked. Stores have had their Christmas stuff out since Halloween. Christmas songs have been playing on the radio since Thanksgiving. Almost every day of the week there's a Christmas parade or a party or a concert somewhere. Most of us have long decorated our trees and hung our lights. Everywhere you turn it's Christmas, Christmas, Christmas. The only time we really get a break from the barrage of Christmas is when we're at Mass.

The Church makes a point to keep our focus on Advent. That's the reason you won't hear any Christmas songs or see any Christmas decorations at Mass. Our readings are carefully selected to put us in the Advent frame of mind. We wear the penitential purple instead of the festive white. The list goes on and on. The Church, in her wisdom, wants us to be able to hear the message of Advent in the midst of all of the Christmas hustle and bustle that permeates the rest of our life.

Advent is a time of hope and spiritual preparation for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God stooped down from His throne in Heaven into human history to offer us mercy and to free us from sin; which disfigures us from being the beautiful image of God we're meant to be. When Jesus came among us on that first Christmas, God's work of salvation was set in motion. God took on flesh. The Son became one of us and like us in all things but sin. Through our baptism, we have become adopted sons and daughters of the Father. We have been grafted into the Body of Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit.

But we have to avoid the trap of thinking that Advent is only about waiting for the sweet little baby Jesus in the manger. It's certainly about that, but Advent is about so much more. It's also about preparing for the Second and final coming of Jesus at the end of time. We have the

assurance that He'll return to bring our salvation to completion. Even though we don't know when, we do know it will happen. That's why we're instructed to always be prepared.

Advent gives us the gift of hope to sustain us during this time of preparation. We're given the same hope that fueled John the Baptist's preaching in the desert. He had encountered Jesus, even before he was born. So he devoted his life to announcing the Lord's coming and preparing the people for His arrival. John's assurance came from the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." These words formed the foundation for his hope.

St. Paul had the same hope of salvation. In our second reading, we heard the unforgettable phrase, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." Paul looked forward to the Second Coming of Christ and wanted to make sure that all Christ's followers would be ready to receive Him. Paul lived this hope even when things looked bleak, even though he was in prison when he wrote these words to the Philippians.

In our first reading, the prophet Baruch delivered a message of hope to the suffering Israelites in exile. They had been thrown out of their homeland. In the midst of their mourning, Baruch was able to say with confidence to those grieving people that God had not abandoned them or their children. He had a beautiful vision of the future. These weren't trite words, offering comfort while lacking real substance. They were words of power. And they speak as much to us here in our day as they did to the Israelite people during the Babylonian Exile. We too are in exile here on earth because our final home is the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Just look around. Today's world is in great need of hope. Authentic hope is in short supply for sure. Sin, greed, lust, hatred, and violence separate heaven from earth. Sometimes it

seems like the darkness will never end. We feel disoriented and discouraged. We can even feel powerless because the darkness appears overwhelming.

But, as Christians, we can look straight into the darkness with hope because we know we have Jesus Christ on our side. He is the God who became man in order to lead all people home to Heaven. He is the God that died on the cross and rose from the dead. He is the God who continues to make Himself available to us in the Eucharist. Each time we receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, when we approach the altar during the Mass as we'll do in a few minutes, we receive food for our journey to God's kingdom, food to give us strength during our exile on earth.

God is always watching over and guiding us. We matter to Him. He will not abandon us. Even our sins cannot stifle our hope because God's goodness and mercy are so much greater than our sins. His Incarnation is the undeniable guarantee that God wants to save us from our sins. He hasn't given up on us. During Advent, the Church invites us to rejoice because we are remembered by God.

This time of year is meant to stir up in our hearts true Christian hope; which in turn inspires true Christian joy. We can start to spread that joy in the remaining weeks of Advent by giving away one Christmas gift right now – the gift of Christian hope. We don't need to order it off the internet or wrap it or spend any money on it. We have received it for free and we can pass it along for free. All of us know people who are distant from God and the Church. Maybe they're trapped by their own sins. Maybe someone else's sins have trapped them. Maybe the hard circumstances of life have made them forget that they are remembered by God, their Savior.

Brothers and sisters, we can reach out to these people during this holiday season. We can offer to help them with their holiday chores. We can invite them to have a cup of hot chocolate,

to sit in front of the fire, to talk, to come back to Mass. We can do something to remind them that God hasn't forgotten about them or given up on them. If we reach out to others, Jesus will be with us. We will give Him an opportunity to rekindle His everlasting hope in a cold and darkened heart. There is no better Christmas present we can give to another person than Christian hope.