

Season of hope

November 29, 2010

The headlines mix hope and fear: The weekend after Thanksgiving, shoppers spent 6.4 percent more than the same period last year, but economists don't know if the good news will last. South Korea's president, Lee Myung Bak, threatened North Korea "will be made to pay" if it provokes its nemesis again. WikiLeaks' release of classified diplomatic documents could destabilize international relations and put lives at risk.

That's just one day's news—one newspaper, top half of the front page. Look inside or tune to the nightly news and talk radio, and turn to the weekly magazines and just about anywhere else "news" is featured, and you'll uncover many more reasons to dredge up dread than to harbor hope.

That's just one of the reasons I'm always thrilled Advent begins with hope.

Anticipating *the* arrival

You know about Advent—the season of the church year that begins four Sundays prior to Christmas and ends on Christmas eve. Many, perhaps most, Baptists strangle on the A-word. For some, "Advent" sounds too much like something Catholics observe. Others simply don't know the term. So, most of us call this "the Christmas season," which is safer, not to mention clear.

I like "Advent" because it reminds us we're awaiting the arrival of Jesus, the Christ-child. Unfortunately, "Christmas season" has become secularized, busy, labored. But "Advent" helps me center on the meaning of the season. It reminds me to live with expectation, anticipation, gladness. Even when annoying Christmas commercials drive me to distraction. Even when I can't find a decent parking space at the mall. Even when I feel overwhelmed with the chores—preparing cards, decorating, engaging in all

the tasks unique to this time of year.

Yuletide irony

(OK, here's an irony: During Advent and Christmas, we await and celebrate the birth of a Baby who arrived more than 2,000 years ago. Christians get ready for the arrival of a Savior we've already accepted. Chronologically, this is impossible. But spiritually, it's necessary. The rest of the year beats us down. We're blessed to be reminded of this anticipation. And by anticipating and celebrating Jesus' birth, it becomes Good News for us all over again. It's always fresh, forever vital.)

We hope because we need

I'm not exactly sure *why* Advent begins with hope. Why not love, joy or peace, the themes we'll mark in the coming three weeks? Maybe it's because hope is the key to unlock access to these other spiritual blessings. Without hope, can we really appropriate love, joy and peace into our lives?

Hope isn't what most people think it is. Too often, we say "hope" when we mean "wish." A wish is a desire, something we want. But hope contains expectation, anticipation, acceptance.

We can live in hope before it is accomplished. We appropriate hope into our lives, acting on it, because we expect it to be true, even before it becomes fact.

Hope and joy are siblings. They're not simply emotions, but deep and abiding spiritual truths. We joyfully live in hope, even when the facts of our lives mitigate against happiness and wishful thinking. We can be joy-full and hope-filled, even in our darkest hours. Why? Because Jesus did, indeed, come to this earth to redeem it—and us. The present facts of our lives are not all that is to be seen, all that should be expected. Jesus, the Christ, transformed all that.

So, we begin this season with hope. Whether or not the economy rebounds. Whether or not nations rise up against nations. Whether or not the "heathen rage." Whether or not 2011 turns out to be better or worse than 2010.

Jesus is coming. Live in hope.