

June Smith's Advent Meditation

December 13, 2017

As most of you know, I have been working this entire calendar year on writing a history of St. David's-in-the-Valley. What does this have to do with Advent, you are wondering? Well for starts, I am still *waiting* for it to be finished! Now I see that sentence is in the passive voice, so I must assure you that writing this history has been anything but passive. Just ask Newt or any visitors to our home this year about the stacks of boxes on the sun porch holding important papers of St. David's. You could even check with Madeline our calico cat, whose new favorite place to lie is on top of a stack of old *Mountain Mannas* on the sofa in my office. *Mountain Manna* was our original church newsletter in pre-Internet days. I have been quite active in working through these papers, newsletters, minutes, official letters, scrapbooks and other historical artifacts and have made a lot of progress. Still, I am waiting for the finished product, a book with pictures and historical details that tells a story of this church and its people in this place.

Since I have been a participant in the story of St. David's myself for the past 40 or so years, this church and its people have been not only my spiritual home but also part of my DNA. It's pretty obvious that St. David's has been very important to me, or I would not be standing here right now. While my personal history has obviously affected the way I am presenting the church's history, my intention has always been to study the records and reflect the true path that the seekers gathered here have followed over these one hundred and twenty-five years as I understand it. The *Songs for the Cycle* tells us "At the turning of the year we look back and speculate on the ebb and flow of life, asking what it indicates. Wisdom speaks, and some will hear at the turning of the year." Looking back, I believe the path that the faithful of St. David's have followed all these years indicates the themes of Advent: coming, waiting, anticipation, new beginnings, hope, peace, joy, and above all, Love.

For starts, I am wondering if St. David observed Advent in his monastery in Pembrokeshire? Advent as we know it dates from the 5th century, so indeed he could have. At the very least, he must have anticipated with great joy the coming of the light of Christ on those dark December nights on the Welsh coast with the sea crashing against the high cliffs.

And what about our founder, Daniel David Davies? When he was growing up and working 12 hours a day in the mining towns of southeastern Wales, he was a faithful member of a Sunday School run by the Rev. Thomas Jeffreys. Daniel David recorded in his autobiography that once when Rev. Jeffreys preached on the text 'Choose ye this day whom ye will serve;' he felt called in his heart to become a God loving and a God serving follower of Jesus. This church we are sitting in now is proof that he answered his call. Once he settled in Cullowhee valley, he became a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church South. But after meeting the Rev. Dr. David Hillhouse Buel, who accompanied the bishop whenever the bishop came west to preach, his longing for a church similar to that of his boyhood was revived. He and Dr. Buel and Bishop Theodore Lyman and others worked together to secure a site for a church, funds for materials, and a builder. Dr. Buel laid the cornerstone in Advent of 1883, and eventually Daniel David's longing was satisfied. He was confirmed, along with his three older daughters, in 1885 in the unfinished church he named for St. David's Cathedral in Wales. It was another seven years after that confirmation before the church was completely finished. When Bishop Lyman consecrated the church in August of 1892, Daniel David was 66 years old. His faith and anticipation over many years had led up to that joyful day, after which a group of faithful Christians had a new place in which to meditate on the coming of the Christ, the light of the world, during the dark days of December.

St. David's vigor in the early years was tied to the Davies and Cox families and to the growth of what began as Cullowhee Normal School, now Western Carolina University. Thomas Augustus Cox was Davies son-in-law, and St. David's-in-the-Valley's parishioners came largely from these two families plus a few other members from the school and the community. As members of the Davies and Cox families died and disbursed and the Great Depression and two world wars turned life in Cullowhee valley upside down, there were finally no more Episcopalians here to worship at St. David's. It was closed in 1941 and then deconsecrated in 1951.

With the end of World War II, Western Carolina Teachers College grew at a lightening pace. In 1946, 496 students attended Western Carolina. By 1966 that number had grown to over 4,000 students. The faculty more than doubled in the decade between 1950 and 1960. A new beginning was in store for St. David's as well when the Rev. A. Rufus

Morgan became Bishop George Henry's right hand man about the time St. David's was closed. Over the next twenty years, Rufus established or restarted eleven missions west of Asheville, including St. David's.

By the mid-1950's Rufus saw St. David's as a perfect student center for the students he had been ministering to in dorm rooms and in campus buildings at the college. Appealing to the National Church Women, he obtained a gift from the United Thank Offering to restore it for that purpose. Nancy Tuttrup, a new faculty wife, wrote of the church, "What a beautiful little jewel it was—set in the lovely woods that one still sees from every church window." Nancy and her husband Paul, Creighton and Jane Sossomon plus other faculty members, students, and some community members scrubbed and polished until all the furnishings were restored and gleamed, and a small meeting room was added. Bishop Henry reconsecrated the church during Advent of 1959, marking another new beginning. The people of Cullowhee valley had a renewed place then in which to worship and build community and from which to serve, a place from which to deepen their commitment to Jesus' way of life, rooted in compassion, acceptance, welcome, and service.

Wisdom has been speaking now for 58 Advents since our church was reopened. During all this time, neither the darkness of December, nor the darkness of disenchantment with a priest or with each other, nor a darkness with the liturgy, nor a darkness with Anglican policies has yet failed to give way to the light of a deeper understanding of God's mystery, to a more fruitful way to serve in Jesus' name, to a greater urgency to live in community. God is Love the scriptures tell us. Advent here leads over and over to that time when Love came down, became like us, and empowers us to give birth to God in our own lives, that we too may be a light in this world.

Today, December 13, is the feast day of St. Lucia. Her name shares a root, *luc*, for the Latin word for light, *lux*. She has traditionally been associated with bringing light and warmth out of the cold darkness of December. She is especially venerated in Sweden with its long, dark days of winter. There, young girls vie for the honor of representing St. Lucia on this day and wearing a crown of candles in the St. Lucia procession. We had St. Lucia processions here during Advent several years ago. One of St. David's former rectors, the Rev. Sherry Mattson, was of Swedish descent and always called attention to St. Lucia.

Growing up Baptist in Winston-Salem in the 1950's, I never knew of Advent by name, and yet the Moravian star hanging on the porches of Moravian churches and of Moravian homes and even as the centerpiece of the downtown festive lights were among my favorite heralds of the season. The beautiful Moravian star recalls the star that guided the Wise Men as they found their way to the Christ child. Come and see, beckoned the star, and they did.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." We have been blessed at St. David's since 1959 to have had four gracious priests who have been concerned far less with our brokenness than with our possibilities as children of God, with what we can do with our life in light, with the hope, joy and peace that comes with knowing we are loved and that we are Love, with how we might serve others as Jesus did, in Advent and in all seasons of the year. Thanks be to God, we continue to do our best, most of the time.

*O Gracious Light, Lord Jesus Christ,
In you the hope of nations shown.
Immortal, holy, blessed is God,
And blessed are you, who make God known.
Now sunset comes, but light shines forth,
The lamps are lit to pierce the night.
Praise to the Bringer of the Dawn
Who dwells in the eternal light.*

Amen.