When you go on a trip you do certain things. If flying, you purchase airline tickets, pack your suitcase early, clean the house, find a caregiver for the dog or cat … you get the idea, there is preparation to leaving. You leave knowing you’ve done all you can do to ease your feelings of anxiety before driving out your home driveway. Thus, each Advent we prepare ourselves for this journey, a trip Christians take each year over four Sundays.

We are to spend time in reflection, readying ourselves for the big day of the year, called the birth of Jesus, Christmas. We make a similar journey during Lent when we prepare our hearts and minds for the resurrection of Jesus, called Easter.

Advent is unique in some ways, because we are given road signs for our journey, where we light four candles we name hope, love, joy and peace. By following the longheld candle-lighting tradition from the 1800’s, we are being encouraged to stay alert as we drive by each roadside candle. There is to be a feeling of arriving or coming into God’s time and space, what theologians call Parousia, God in our flesh, and Jesus coming back to us. This sacred journey is a time to reflect on the image of God within us, and the world around us. Before I speak further about the Advent preparation, let me give you a brief history lesson on the lighting of an Advent wreath.

The history behind Advent candles goes like this. In **1839**, Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808-81), a Lutheran pastor in Germany, built a wreath out of an old cartwheel to help the children in his mission school count the days until Christmas. He added small candles to be lit every weekday and Saturday during Advent, and on Sundays, a large white candle was lit. Gradually, other people adopted the idea of lighting candles, and eventually the candles were reduced from a daily candle to four candles representing four different Sundays up to the birth of Jesus. The four candles now represent hope, love, joy, and peace. The first candle of Advent is named hope.

**HOPE.** God’s hope is at hand. But do we know how to access God’s hope when the culture around us thrives on cynicism, mistrust, and a lack of care for each other and our planet? Can we find hope during a pandemic? These are good questions to ponder during Advent, and I am giving myself three lessons to practice on how to build hope within my heart, mind and soul.

**Lesson Number 1: Can I get back to the basics of experiencing God?** I Thessalonians says, “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.” I Thessalonians is the earliest written letter in the New Testament, written around 51 A.D., which is only 20 years past the death and resurrection of Jesus. The idea behind the letter is one of pastoral concern and defining what ‘salvation or holiness’ means for Christians. Paul acknowledges that he and the group of Thessalonian Christians may feel incomplete as they struggle not connecting with Paul and the other disciples, yet in spite of the separation, Paul is giving thanks for an emerging faith, a faith being built as they put their trust in the Spirit of Jesus.

If we have learned one lesson from the pandemic it is this, “We need physical connection to experience at-one-ment with God and each other. And, basically, Paul is telling the Thessalonians, don’t give up hope, we will get to Thessalonica, but until that time, take heart, God the Father and Jesus are with you. Paul says, “May God our Father himself and our Master Jesus clear the road to you! And may the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and holiness, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master Jesus arrives with all his followers” (The Message by Eugene Peterson. Take heart, Jesus is with us.

**LESSON NUMBER 2: Strengthen my heart in holiness.** Using the word holy in the 21st century may seem like an oxymoron in our culture, but let’s unpack the word holy. Abraham Heschel as a Jewish rabbi would say this about the word holy, “The Sabbath is all holiness. Nothing is essentially required than for a soul to receive more soul.” (Sabbath, p. 82). I like to think that for my soul to receive more soul, I must examine how God engages with me, and how I engage with God. I need to return to the story of Adam and Eve, where they are kicked out of the Garden of Eden, so I am reminded that Scripture tells us that humanity is made in the ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ of God. The image of God is at the core of our being, and if we can be honest with ourselves, God’s image in humanity has not been destroyed, and our very beings are called sacred, not because we have been baptized or because we belong to one faith tradition over another. We are sacred because we have been simply born; born with the image of God in us. Where can our hope be found? In knowing that we must claim God’s image and goodness within ourselves, otherwise, our minds and hearts will become deaf to inner voice of the Holy Spirit.

**LESSON NUMBER 3: I must see life through my tears.** I am not a natural crier, but a lack of tears does not mean I don’t feel things deeply. J. Phillip Newell, in his book, “Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation,” instructs us that” humanity suffers from a ‘bond of forgetfulness’ (p. 5). What have we forgotten? We do not know ourselves, nor do we remember our beginnings. Newell reminds us that the more distant we become from our true self, the more we lose touch with the wisdom that is naturally within us. And when we forget the deep root of our being, our ‘gut’, that we are stamped with the image of God at the time of our birth, then we become prone to fear and anxiety. Does this sound familiar for people in the 21st century?

Newell suggests that we should be weeping more as we see the destruction of people, the abuse of animals and the desecration of our earthly planet. He admonishes us to stay in touch with the pain and loss we feel, otherwise, we will close ourselves off to life and become bitter. Bitterness only leads to more bitterness, despair, and hopelessness. Crying, Newell says, somehow washes the inner lens of our heart, allowing us to see God in ourselves more clearly. Seeing life through our tears allows us to live with more openness and hope. We reclaim ourselves in God.

I know this is a lot to take in for the first Sunday of Advent. But we are to prepare the way for us to wake up. Soul searching is hard work. It requires effort. It requires space and time. If our hearts and minds are clouded with fear, anxiety, and whatever else we have ignored in our life, then our minds will become dulled, and the slow emergence of despair will ooze in. And we will fill ourselves up with false gods when we feel empty. For you see, Scripture tells us that our hope is in the Lord. And Jesus counsels us to “Be on guard.” Return to the basics of your faith, where it’s just Jesus and you talking to each other. Strengthen your hearts with holiness, where you return to God’s image of you, not the image people place on you. And, above all, when life becomes too difficult to bear, then cry to keep the eyes of your heart clear and vibrant for seeing. I love reading these words from John O’Donohue:

May all that is unforgiven in you be released.

May your fears yield their deepest tranquilities.

May all that is unlived in you

Blossom into a future graced with love.

What is hope? The ability to open ourselves up to Christ living in us. The promise that Jesus will return. The hope, as Paul said to the Thessalonians, that until Jesus returns we will sustain our faith in Jesus, the Christ. Amen.