

“As the World Turns”

*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings,
Lift up your voice with strength to say . . . “Here is your God!”
Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
and marked off the heavens with a span?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth . . .
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain!
(Isaiah 40:9, 12, 22)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Second Sunday of Advent, **December 9, 2018**
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My Advent sermon series is borrowing for title and theme some of television history’s best recognized daytime *Soap Operas*. Last Sunday we began our journey at “*The Edge of Night*,” emerging from the “*Dark Shadows*” of the deep night toward a light just beginning to shine with a single candle on the Advent wreath. We focused on Isaiah’s prophecy that in the Galilee an unexpected light would shine. “*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and to those who living in a land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.*” We saw how Matthew borrowed Isaiah’s words to declare that Jesus was that dawning light bringing the world to the edge of its long night. We also heard the Apostle Paul’s admonition, “*now it high time to awake from sleep, for the night is far gone, the day is near.*”

Our destination is Christmas Eve, when I’ll offer a brief meditation, “*Guiding Light*,” inviting us to consider the shepherds’ wonder as the natal star leads them from the Shepherds’ Fields outside Bethlehem to the manger to find Mary and Joseph and the newborn savior. Thanks for joining us on our 2018 Advent journey from “*The Edge of Night*” to the “*Guiding Light*.”

Last week I asked what it is about daytime dramas rendering their titles so Advent-friendly, discovering that matching soap titles with Advent themes has been extremely easy. I suggested that this is because soap operas offer an open-ended narrative, a sequential story. As one writer and expert in the genre of daytime television surmised, “*Each episode ends with a promise that the storyline is to be continued.*”

Advent, more than any other season in our liturgical year, is a sequential countdown with each Sunday ending with a promise that another candle will be lit the following week. That light, however feeble now, will grow until God becomes flesh, entering the *Days of our Lives*, with *One Life to Live*. (See how easy it is?)

That’s the wonder of the Christmas message, that the eternal God would join the plodding narrative of human frailty and suffering and, at last, on the cross, enter *Death’s Dark Shadows*, the phrase we sang last Sunday in the Advent hymn, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. The Hebrew word *Emmanuel* means “*God with us.*” Yes, God has entered *The Days of our Lives*.

Days of Our Lives was my second choice for a title today. You will no doubt recognize the iconic opening of that soap, “*Like sands through the hour-glass, so are the days of our lives.*” *Days of Our Lives* is the longest running daytime drama on NBC, premiering November 8, 1965 and continuing still in its 53rd year.

It will need to run one more year, though, to catch up to *As the World Turns*, which ran for an incredible 54 years, airing nearly 14,000 episodes on CBS from 1956 to 2010, the third highest count of episodes in television history, surpassed only by *General Hospital* and *Guiding Light*.

I chose ATWT today while thinking of how Isaiah takes us into the heavens in a cosmic chorus of praise above the globe, the orb, of earth:

*Who has measured the
waters in the hollow of
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*and marked off the heavens with a span?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth . . .
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain!
(Isaiah 40:9, 12, 22)*

Isaiah’s image of God sitting above the circle of the earth and marking off the heavens with a span seemed to me perfect illustrated by the opening image of *As the World Turns*. I want to share a unique bit of Americana associated with ATWT. Fifty-five years ago, on November 22, 1963, about ten minutes into the live CBS broadcast of *As The World Turns*, the Hughes family was discussing Thanksgiving plans when the show was interrupted. Perhaps some of you were viewing ATWT that day. If so, you saw a static image: “CBS News Bulletin,” over which you heard the voice of Walter Cronkite:

Here is a bulletin from CBS News. In Dallas, Texas, three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade in downtown Dallas. The first reports say that President Kennedy has been seriously wounded by this shooting . . . Repeating, a bulletin from CBS News, President Kennedy has been shot by a would-be assassin in Dallas, Texas. Stay tuned to CBS News for further details.

After the announcement, CBS rejoined *As The World Turns*. The cast, performing live, was unaware of the rapidly developing situation. It was a moment, contrary to the title *As the World Turns*, when our world seemed abruptly to stand still. It was one of those horrible days, like this

past Friday, December 7 – Pearl Harbor Day’s 77th anniversary -- when the world seemed to stand still, to cease its natural revolution.

The truth is, though, while history will long mark those dates, the world does continue to turn, and the *Days of our Lives* plod along on its journey, ever in a *Search for Tomorrow*. It’s that theme of the Journey that the Second Sunday of Advent invites us to consider.

Two points are needed for a Way to exist, and with the Second Candle we now have two points of light. With only one candle, as last Sunday, we are direction-less. It draws us toward the flame, out of the *Dark Shadows* at *The Edge of Night*, but where do we go from here? Without a second candle, we merely huddle in hope.

The lighting of the second candle offers direction. What is being declared is that Christ is our Way. We now recognize that a course is being charted, a path illuminated, if we will only follow it into what we cannot yet see, into *Another World* that is waiting for us. Isaiah is talking about another world where the wilderness blossoms like a rose and streams flow in the desert, where valleys are lifted up and mountains and hills are made low.

It is *Another World* into which Advent invites us, but we need a highway to take us there. Who will show us the Way? Isaiah answers that question: “*Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your Way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Prepare the Way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*” Mark’s gospel quotes Isaiah to point to John the Baptist as that voice crying in the wilderness, “*Prepare ye the Way of the Lord.*” Our Advent wreath’s sequential lights illuminate a highway around the circle where we will discover that God has joined us, Emmanuel, in the *Days of our Lives*.

There is a fundamental difference between the freeway and the highway. The freeway is destination-oriented, while the highway is experience-oriented. The image Isaiah offers is life on the old-fashioned highway, Charles Kuralt style. Charles Kuralt’s “*Life on the Road*” series earned him the title, *The Poet of Small Town America*. He traveled the highways, those twisting two-laners leading right under the flashing yellow lights of small town America.

It’s a distinction not without a difference. A freeway is for getting from Point A to Point B as quickly as possible. Detours, side roads, crossroads are unwelcome. A freeway finds its most satisfying experience at the point of destination. The road is not meant to be a part of the experience. When the freeway does become part of the experience, it’s not a good thing, but likely because you’re stuck in a jam with way too much unwelcome time to observe what you would rather not observe, what you would rather see only as a blur out your window.

One enters a freeway at a designated entrance and gets off at a pre-planned exit, with little between but a certain sameness constructed with one goal in mind, to shuttle you to your destination as fast as possible. In a very real sense, then, life doesn’t happen on the freeway, but is in limbo until you arrive at your destination.

A highway, on the other hand, is experience-oriented. The highway becomes part of the experience. Sameness doesn’t figure into the equation. The scenery is always shifting. Distractions are more welcome, inviting the traveler to pull off the road into small communities, to meander in a small town’s Main Street shops.

Last weekend I officiated at a wedding in Fordyce, where 20 years ago, in 1998, I was appointed pastor of FUMC. It was a nostalgic experience for me, recalling how right across the street from my office was one of Arkansas' most iconic bakery and restaurants, Klappenbach's, which made statewide news and beyond when Norm and Lee finally retired a few years ago. How many the precious times I met travelers there over lunch or a cheese Danish, visitors lingering in the city, relaxing. The highway slows you down, more accepting of slowness.

There's a classic episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* which I suspect almost everybody here saw and will remember. It was called *Man in a Hurry*, aired on January 14, 1963. A traveler's car broke down on Sunday morning on the highway two miles outside of Mayberry. Mayberry was a crossroad Malcolm Tucker would rather have experienced as a blur out his window. Malcolm was a busy man whose destination was the larger town of Charlotte, where he had a business appointment Monday morning, an appointment he thought crucial.

He walked the two miles into town but found it deserted, at least until church let out. Gomer was working at the garage after church but he could only pump gas, and Wally, owner and mechanic, says he won't repair the car until Monday. The stranger is angered by the slow pace of life at this crossroad of Mayberry. Malcolm couldn't believe his misfortune to land in a place with such a lack of urgency. An abundance of hospitality was offered by Mayberry, but it was rapid efficiency Malcolm sought.

It was a delightful episode, watching Malcolm's stress build higher and higher as he watched Andy and Barney relax on the porch, strumming the guitar and rocking, peeling an apple with one continuous stroke of the knife without breaking the peel. This is, as I think of it, a wonderful "*As the Apple Turns*" image of our theme.

Gradually, though, especially as he hears Andy and Barney sing "*O, come to the church in the wildwood,*" his stress melts away. He learns that his destination may not be as important as he had imagined it. A bit grudgingly he joins the slow and careful revolution of the apple.

The episode ends with Malcolm dozing in the rocker, a half-peeled apple in his hand. Malcolm had found himself in *Another World*. The valley had been lifted up, the rough places made plain. What he had dreaded was becoming a blessing.

