Happy New Year!

I mean Happy Christian New Year!

Last Sunday marked the completion of the Christian Year.

This Sunday the first Sunday of the Season of Advent marks the beginning of a new Christian Year.

Advent is about many different things.

Advent along with Lent one of two penitential seasons of the Church year. Until about a decade ago I wasn’t a big fan of the penitential seasons or the concept of penance. Conceptually there is a very direct connection between the institutions of the penal system and penitentiaries to penitence. In the time of monks and monasteries if a member offended the community, he was isolated, literally locked up until he came to his senses, changed his ways and was then welcomed to return to the community. One of the traditional understandings of doing penance or of being penitential is about punishing ourselves or others, often physically, sometimes psychologically or spiritually in order to bring ourselves to a place of rightness and/or right relationship either with ourselves, with the community or with God. Most of my objection is that it excludes the concept and the actions of grace. This understanding of punishing ourselves or others to be brought into a right or righteous place is I think counterproductive.

A different understanding is that penitence is about turning. Turning away from that which injures and hurts, turning from all that causes suffering and destruction, turning from all that is unjust and unfair and turning toward goodness and God. Turning toward that which gives life and fulness of life. I can get behind the idea of turning and this understanding of being penitent collectively and individually.

Advent is also about waiting and preparing. As the father of two daughters, I have had two intensive experiences of waiting and preparing.

I was called to be minister with Dauphin First United Church starting July 01, 1987 and four days later on July 4th Heather and I got married. The community was quite excited to have a newly married couple in their midst. After a couple of years a few people, some whose own children were not providing them with grandchildren, began to inquire about whether or not we planned to have children and when. Our eldest daughter was born in late May of 1990. She was two weeks past her due date which means that Heather and I learned she was on her way in September. Because as a minister I knew that not all pregnancies go well or end happily Heather and I delayed telling people about this and heeded the advice of the time to wait three months before sharing our news. The one exception was Heather’s mother and her husband, a medical doctor. This meant that the time we were prepared to share our news coincided with the first Sunday of Advent. So, I shared it as part of a conversation with the children as I talked about waiting and that Heather and I were waiting as we had been told that we were going to be parents. There was (if you will pardon the pun) a pregnant pause and then the congregation erupted in celebration. Kelsey was welcomed and much loved by that community of faith. She was welcomed by the children and by the elders alike.

As humans some of us spend a lot of time waiting. I remember as a child waiting for Christmas and for my birthday to come and later to be old enough to get my driver’s license and to have my life change, which it did. I remember waiting to graduate Grade 12, getting my first job, leaving home and entering the adult world. Having worked for a year I returned to school attending University and waited six years and two graduations to become an ordained minister. But in the midst of all that waiting I was also living, enjoying family and friendship.

Advent is also about preparing. About preparing to welcome Christ into our world and into our lives. It is about retelling the story of Christ’s birth and what it means for us and for our world, in our worship and in our hymnody and music.

Advent is about bringing hope. About bringing hope and peace, and joy and love into our lives and into our world. It is about working and preparing to make those things possible and real. In today’s world it is about doing what we can to make our carbon footprint smaller, to make our systems more compassionate and just, about working to end prejudice and hatred, about learning to share so that everyone has enough. Advent is about waiting for and creating a world that is renewed and changed.

May this Advent season be everything that we need it to be. A time of working and preparing to welcome Jesus; a time of hoping and working for a world of peace, joy and love.