By Pat Haggerty

We have survived Black Friday and Cyber-Monday! What's next? Retailers have been pushing the spirit of Christmas since Halloween, and radio stations can now legitimately play Christmas songs. Our newspapers are thick with advertisements for all those things we need to buy. The Hallmark Channel has its countdown of holiday-themed shows where everyone finds true love, and Santa always has a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

It appears to me that we need some focus. We need to be able to take a breath and cut through all the "stuff" that is not Christmas. Believe me, I'm not against gifts and shopping, nor am I against the Hallmark channel. To be honest, there's nothing more relaxing that watching some of the Hallmark countdown to Christmas movies!

Amidst all of that, though, I need to be reminded of the essence of Christmas and how to live out the season of Advent to its fullest. I renew this feeling every year. It's almost like making a New Year's resolution---and where does that get me?! I am going to attempt something different this Advent season. I am going to give myself a focus or a visual cue. It is going to be the Advent Wreath. That will serve as my very own "countdown to Christmas."

Every Sunday during the season of Advent the priest lights the candle that symbolizes a particular week in Advent. Each candle, nestled in its bed of greenery, shines the way for us as we prepare for Jesus' coming into our lives. The light from each candle stands for the Light that leads us out of darkness into new life.

Often, a reading from Isaiah accompanies the lighting: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing. As they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as people make merry when dividing spoils. For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever (Is 9:1-2, 5-6)."

Let us ponder these words as we await the arrival of our Prince of Peace. Let us use the symbol of the light as our guide during this blessed season. We need to follow the light to find the Light. Let us be reminded of the salvation we seek through the Christ Child. The Collect of the first Sunday of Advent reminds us of that: “Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that , gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.”

Let us follow the light and run forth to meet Him.