

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The Rev.
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Don't begin the sermon yet...wait...in silence...in awkwardness and see what happens.

Invite congregation to relax and have a seat.

How was that transition? What kinds of things were going through your mind as we waited? Did you wonder what to do? Were you looking to others to see what they were doing? Were you wondering what I was doing? Was I praying or just confused, or did I lose my sermon? Did it feel like something was supposed to happen, but you weren't sure what? Were you experiencing discomfort? Or were you completely comfortable with it?

And with that...Welcome to Advent...where the awkwardness of waiting and anticipation are heightened as we await the coming of God.

It's a time of waiting for gifts, both those wrapped up under sap encrusted, aromatic trees and for the true gift of God's coming into human reality as a baby boy. But, what is this foreboding message? Why instill this slice of anxiety? Isn't our world already filled with enough uncertainty? It seems, this is the point. We get to struggle as a community following in the way of Jesus with what it means to wait in the midst of these cosmic struggles, uncertainties, and anxieties.

This morning, we begin a new year as Christians and with it we are also marking a new chapter in the life of some of our parish's youth and parents. Adolescence and young adulthood in and of themselves are a lifetime's worth of anxiety both for the youth and for the parents. It has never been easy carving out an identity or sense of belonging in the middle and high school years, but I cannot imagine what it must be like today. I've been working with youth on and off for the past fifteen years in churches. Now more than ever I see the rampant targeting of our youth through advertising for the beast of hyper-consumerism, which only increases during this time or year. The perceived need for the latest device, fashion article, or piece of sports gear is aimed directly at the fears inherent in the struggle for belonging. The pressure to get into a "good" college starts earlier now than ever before. Knowing what kind of work you want to do and the ability to specialize in specific areas of learning is more focused and at earlier ages. And the need to be involved in multiple extra curricular activities is seldom sustainable in the lives of our young people. Ours is a culture that no longer cares for its youth. We devour them. The season of life our youth are in the midst of is an Advent in and of itself. It is a life very much on the cusp of something new that is emerging. So what does that look like to be present to their spiritual, emotional, and physical needs here and now?

The situation I am describing isn't necessarily new, but the progression into what I have described has been so subtle that it has been difficult to see it happening and thus difficult to know how to respond as communities of faith. I can look back on my own youth and my attempts to differentiate myself from my parents and can now see what was being imposed on me then. But what I experienced pales in comparison to what is before our youth today. Looking at the signs, I also cannot imagine what is like to attempt to parent a young person in this environment. A rapidly changing economy, a disintegrating planet, an often dysfunctional political environment, unfathomable global poverty, alarming rates of violence...the list could go on. What does Advent look like when the signs are so grim? How do we await the coming of God in this reality?

Jesus describes this kind of analysis as that of paying attention to signs. He uses the example of the fig tree and to notice the sprouts to tell when summer is coming. If we pay attention to the sprouts of what I am describing above, what sort of season, spiritually speaking, is coming near?

James Fowler, who has been an authority on human faith development, says, "The challenge and invitation that the Christian community has to offer adolescents and young adults is that of shaping their young adult dream in terms of vocation. To offer this challenge and invitation will mean to surround youth and young adults with a counterculture--an alternative consciousness. The voices inviting them to destiny dreams are powerful and attractive." He says that often our message is to be sure to major in something marketable, to think about what will get you a good job, don't waste classes on things like literature, philosophy, or art. However, he goes on to say, "Invitations to vocation dreams, by contrast, are more likely to ask questions like these: 'What seem to be your gifts? What kinds of things do you do well? What kinds of activities and contributions really give you a sense of worthiness? What kinds of things do you find most challenging and fulfilling to do? In what kind of activities do you feel that you are most yourself?...and even...'What kinds of things do you feel that you and God can do with your life that will make a difference for good in our world?'"

And I don't think Fowler's words apply only to youth and young adults. In other words...dream. Take the time to dream and to be and become one who not only lives your dreams, but also dreams new dreams. It seems to me those are Advent questions at their core. What are our dreams? Where are we hoping for God to break into our human reality and how can we join in? What is the dream of God and when will it become a reality?

Advent. Wait. Anticipate. Await the coming of God amidst impending strife and struggle. This is a difficult tension don't you think? We don't have the luxury of ignoring the signs. Jesus says to be alert. He also says to be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life and that we do not fall into this trap of fear and anxiety.

So what does this anticipation, this waiting for the coming of God look like? Think back to last week's sermon. There was a one word theme. Do you recall what it was? Crazy. It's true right? God's way of coming near is fraught with struggle and pain. At the beginning of his life Christ comes to us with a bounty on his head as a social outcast and through the pains of natural childbirth in a cave surrounded by livestock and dirty shepherds. At the end of his life God suffers social and religious humiliation, torture, abandonment, and ultimately death. Two parallel seasons precede these events as times of preparation. We wait, not in passivity, not in luxury, not in prosperity for the dream and reality of God is not close. We wait in struggle, in brokenness, in pain for there is where God's dream comes close to our reality.

This is why becoming an adult is like the kingdom of God coming near. It is a struggle to find your voice and it should be. It is a beautiful struggle. This is why being a parent who is able to let go is like the kingdom of God coming near. It is painful to watch your child struggle and make mistakes and it should be. But it is a beautiful pain. Why, because of Love. This is why the season of Advent starts the way it does. The world is not all that different in so many ways than it was when Mary was in her third trimester. It is filled with corruption, fear, tension. But there is an alternative, a countercultural way to live in the midst of it. It is a non-anxious presence where Love of self and others dissipates fear and anxiety. Advent is a way of living, allowing the Second Coming to come again and again in way we think, act, and live.

Two Advents ago, I was in the midst of my own personal Advent season. Something new was being birthed in me and a new reality was on the horizon. The difficulty was that I did not know what it was. I was in the midst of a struggle to regain my voice and my identity that I had lost in ruts of empty routine and complacency. A dear friend who was journeying with me through these pangs sent me a poem that I would like to leave you with. I share it because it resonated so deeply within me and spoke to my experience of waiting and expectation and also because it seems to me to be an Advent Psalm of sorts.

For a New Beginning by John O'Donohue.

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

This incarnation of God that we are expecting and this coming again of Christ that we hope for is not for the safe, mundane, or status quo. This waiting means risk and dreaming, which requires adventure and courage. Because God's coming close happens when things are at their most chaotic and painful for that is where we need God and each other most. It is in weakness and vulnerability where Divine strength and hope emerge to carry us and be carried by us to others. May we be and continually become a people of Advent wherever we are in our life's story allowing God to write new chapters of radical Grace and Love through us and in us

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