

“The Price of Advent”

Rev. David Gregory

December 2, 2018

First Sunday of Advent



*Icon of the Visitation:
Mary and Elizabeth*

First reading

*Luke 1:51-55 (from the Song of Mary)
Contemporary English Version*

*The Lord has used
his powerful arm
to scatter those
who are proud.*

*He drags strong rulers
from their thrones
and puts humble people
in places of power.*

*God gives the hungry
good things to eat,
and sends the rich away
with nothing.*

*He helps his servant Israel
and is always merciful
to his people.*

*The Lord made this promise
to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his family
forever!*

Second reading

Kelly Isola, from a blog post Advent Is Always Arriving

Advent is, above all else, a call to REALLY be awake, moving out of our comfort zone in order to be in full consciousness—and paying the price that comes with being that alive and aware. Yes, there is a price to Advent. There is a price to embracing my humanness, in all its glory and all its suffering. There is a price to pay for engaging with your suffering, for “listening to the stones of the wall.” It takes struggles for our light to fully form, to be Emmanuel, “God with us.” Jesus’ one sermon about the “kingdom” says the kingdom is always here and always not yet here. One of our greatest paradoxes of the spiritual journey.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, but I gotta break this to you gently. It's not really Christmas. Not yet. In the telling of the story, at least, "Christmas" begins ... well ... on Christmas, or in our case, Christmas Eve. I can scarcely find a ministerial colleague who does not sigh at the rush toward Christmas, who does not create a sermon series or a theme related to “Hey, wait a minute. What about Advent?” It's like, “You said you'd clean your room before you went out to play. Hold your horses.” There are some things that need to happen before the other thing can happen.

This is the Sunday we enter the season of Advent, the time of preparation, but what are we preparing for? Advent is not about Christmas shopping and baking cookies, though we're going to do some of that. It's not about plays, programs, or concerts, even though we're going to do some of those. Advent is not flashy or showy or sexy enough to make it into social consciousness. Home Depot never has an Advent display, and I'm grateful for that. I cannot imagine what that would look like. And there's a reason for that. How would you make plastic sparkly things to depict something that is hidden?

The best metaphor here—and it's a really handy one right now—is the unborn child. Present, but unseen; in proximity, but still hidden in the dark, warm, secure, gestational place where Spirit rests in waiting, waiting for the appropriate moment, as the story goes, at the appearance of a natal star, the star that we can choose to see and follow.

It will not come as a surprise to you that I am an advocate for looking inward. I am the guy who taught people how to meditate on a New York subway. Several of our folks are with Carol Saysette in silent retreat, and as much as I love being here, secretly I wish I were with them. As the pulse of activity heightens around the holidays, it may seem counter-intuitive to pull back and wait in the shadows. The culture around us may not take kindly to a season steeped in such introversion or introspection. Quite frankly, it doesn't sell. It's a niche market, and here at Community Congregational Church, I think it might be our niche. Silence is gestational. Silence is nurture. Silence, for lack of a better term is a reboot of our operating system, and it happens to be the very nature of the beginning of our story.

Mary had a secret that she shared with her cousin Elizabeth, children leaping in their respective wombs, two secrets waiting for the right moment, two important teachers who could not yet speak, waiting in Silence for the consolation of Israel, the wordless groaning of people waiting to be set free. That's what Mary's song is all about—scattering the proud and bringing justice to the oppressed. Justice is the work of an enlightened humanity, but that humanity must first be enlightened. It is not a step that can be skipped over. We must be grounded in our actions, and in order to do that, we need gestational silence.

Thomas Merton, in his poem entitled *Be Silent*, asks us to

Be still. Listen to the stones of the wall. Be silent, they try to speak your name.
Listen to the living walls. Who are you? Whose silence are you?

The second reading today is from Kelly Isola, a peace-worker, transformational consultant, and Unity minister. She speaks of Advent as the time for an

inward journey of self-reflection and self-awareness—how else can I know my own blind spots to becoming an ever-expanding expression of God consciousness, of being that “Emmanuel?”

In our tradition, we recognize “Emmanuel” as “God with us.” It is a name that fully expresses incarnation. The coming of the Christ Child is the birth of something within us, the “God *in* us.” This star that we follow is not something in a far-away universe; it is inside of us.

Advent, the beginning of the journey that I invited you on last week, is meant to give us the luxury of time, of waiting for something to arrive—the arrival of consciousness, an awareness of something that is already here, here all the time, always and forever. It is this energy we call life, that which beats our hearts and breathes us. This inward journey, however, should not be construed as another self-help program. This is not about retreating from life so we can have a nice holiday later this month, though there's nothing wrong with that. We just need to evolve a lot further. As Richard Rohr puts it:

There is entirely too much suffering, devastation, injustice, desolation, loneliness, violence and poverty on our planet to continue seeing and practicing Advent as a sentimental season about an infantile Jesus or infantile gospel.

Sentimental seasons are about getting into the same routines we've always had, doing things the way we've always done them, keeping the patterns, following the traditions, and coloring within the lines.

In my childhood it was always the same. On Christmas Eve you eat lasagna, then you go to church and sing Christmas carols. Then you choose one gift, and one gift only, from under the tree to open before bedtime. On Christmas morning, you wait for everyone to wake up (my sister always took too long). Once everyone is in place, you take turns opening gifts, savoring each one, waiting for the oohs and ahhs to subside before moving to the next person. It's the way we've always done it. It's how my mother did it. It's how her mother did it. We just do it. We could do it in our sleep. And there's the rub. We could do it in our sleep.

Above all else, Advent is a call to become fully awake, and in the words of today's reading, moving out of our comfort zone in order to be in full consciousness—and paying the price that comes with being that alive and aware. Yes, there is a price to Advent. There is a price to embracing my humanness, in all its glory and all its suffering.

I struggle with the world as it is. I am often heartsick over what I am tempted to think of as a devolving culture. At times I feel powerless. I know in my brain, and I know from history, that these moments pass. Life is all about light and shadow, good and evil, justice and oppression, peace and war. I just want to get on with it, move on to something better, see a better future for my grandchildren. The real price of Advent is that we become so aware and so awake that we cannot anesthetize ourselves from all of those human struggles. The holiday season then is not an escape from reality. It is a time to move from our comfort zone and become fully conscious, whatever that might mean, and wherever that might take us. And—ok—go eat a cookie or two; raise a glass in celebration; enjoy the gift-giving, the music, the lights, the families and firesides. 'Tis the season. Let's just do it in an awakened fashion and stay out of the fog. Shall we?

May it be so.

