

"Go Easy"

Rev. David Gregory

December 13, 2020

Advent 3



Readings

Excerpt of *Isaiah 61:1-3*

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken, announce freedom to all captives,
pardon all prisoners . . . and to comfort all who mourn,
To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion,
give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,
messages of joy instead of news of doom,
a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.

When I Am Among the Trees

Mary Oliver

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

Welcome to the Third Sunday in Advent. We're happy to have so many friends from near and far who join us in our online programs. We are a diverse group of spiritual seekers, and we are deeply grateful for the technology that allows us to continue as a community, and to invite others into our ever-widening circle. While our individual paths are varied, the DNA of our community is in what is known as the progressive Protestant Mainline, a stream of Christianity that most would agree is in the midst of a massive reformation. Future generations will look back and have an easier time identifying it historically, but within our own lifetimes we can only stay present to the changes that we see.

Much of what we have identified as western Christianity is clearly drawing to a close. New expressions are trying to be born, and the pangs of that process are undoubtedly heightened by the global pandemic. As in every birth, there is discomfort and pain, a sense of agitation and unrest, and some anxiety over what is about to happen. But if everything moves in accordance with its design, an exciting new prospect awaits us, something we may never have seen before, and like a newborn baby, we will welcome it into our arms as a beautiful new creation, and we'll be the richer and happier for it.

There has never been a more auspicious moment for this to happen. Heaven and earth are combining to express a huge shift in energy, and we get to be the midwives of this new creation. It could happen in a palace or in a lowly stable, but it's happening. And the season of Advent gives us an opportunity to tune ourselves to its beauty.

There are two seasons in the church year that give us unique openings for introspection, contemplation, and growth. Lent is in springtime, with its ever-increasing light to guide us forward. But Advent takes us into its deepening darkness, the kind that could be mistaken for hibernation. And that is why at this mid-point in the process, we light the candle of joy, lest we slumber too deeply. It awakens us to all of the excitement and pleasure of what this impending birth will mean. It's an interruption of the broadcast for an important announcement, which says, "Breathe, celebrate, let your heart be light."

In the medieval world, Advent was a time of severe penance. The candle of joy says, "No, no, no! That's not it at all!" There is a dour authoritarian energy in the world that says you can't have something wonderful until you've paid dearly for it. The candle of joy says, "It's just a present that you open." This is the full meaning of grace. It's why when someone gives us a gift we don't write them a check for it. We say *thank you*. We try it on and invite others to admire it while we bask in the glow of someone's thoughtfulness.

The ancient Hebrews were in dire need of this grace. Filled with grief from years of captivity in Babylon, while Zion lay in ruins, they lived in what could only be described as the poverty of body and soul. And then the second Isaiah came along and painted them a glorious portrait of their new life that was being born. The pile of ashes was hauled away and replaced with huge bouquets of roses. This is the kind of joy that can jolt you right out of your despair and remind you that though we're not quite there, we are ever so close.

Sometimes we forget where we are, until we see that bright blue sky appearing in the distant horizon, just over that very next hillside. For Mary Oliver, the trees were her daily salvation with their "hints of gladness" everywhere, and the light flowing from their branches. The lesson of the trees is that joy is never complicated; it's one single, clearly-focused flow of energy that says, "Good on ya! You got this! Just a little bit more and you're there! Stop trying so hard and you'll coast right on in."

In the days before smart phones and search engines, we all experienced those moments when we were trying to remember the name of a book or its author, perhaps a movie or an actor, or maybe someone we once knew who had simply escaped our memory. We tried and we worked, and we did everything we could think of to get the synapses to fire and wire, and nothing happened. That's when we dropped the quest and moved on. Suddenly, later, the information dawned on us when we least expected it, and we said out loud perhaps, "Now why couldn't I have thought of that before?" The answer to that question is *resistance*. Our focus on not remembering became so strong it was the only reality we could see. When we looked elsewhere, memory flowed right in.

We live today on the threshold of a new year. We thank God for that, though we realize that some of our most difficult days are still ahead of us. We can get through them, but we have to keep moving. And one day, on the other side of this pandemic, we will be invited to drop our masks, to let go of our resistance, and to allow a sense of vulnerability to take hold in us. It's not time for that yet, but my concern is that we may find we've lost our ability to let go. It may take us longer than we can imagine now to emerge from our isolation and to begin to live in a brand new world. Perhaps it will feel like a collective Rip Van Winkle moment, where the world will have gone on without us. It may seem a strange place to us. Some of the things we always counted on will be gone. Favorite shops or restaurants may be out of business. We'll all have gotten a little older. Some of our teetering faith communities may have fallen by the wayside. The world will be what the world will be, and we don't have to fix it. We just need to go easy, enjoy the fragrance of the roses and the rustling of the trees. One by one we'll open our gifts, savor the moments of receiving them, and nurture the new life we've been given. And we'll allow the newborn among us to remind us that all shall be well.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

