

ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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“The Readiness Is All”:

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, December 6, 2015

The Second Sunday of Advent—Based on Luke 3:1-6

*If it be now,
'tis not to come;
if it be not to come, it will be now;
if it be not now, yet it will come:
the readiness is all.*

OK, That's Hamlet, not Scripture, but I think it has something to tell us about Advent. Advent is one of those seasons of the Church year when the mood inside these walls is especially different from the mood outside. Outside, you can feel the buildup to Christmas intensifying. Get your shopping done! There are bargains to be had—better hurry! Buy for the kids, the parents, the spouse. And, hey—buy something for yourself, too. After all, who knows what you want better than you do?

Inside here though—the readings take us to a very different place. The unknown prophet named by tradition as Malachi starts off on a joyful note: the Lord whom we seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom we delight—he is coming. And then the prophet asks us, darkly, “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

He tells us that the Lord will refine us like silver—which involves fire—and the experience will be like cleansing garments with fuller's soap. Now, fuller's soap is not Ivory Snow, or some such nice gentle cleanser that softens your hands while you do the dishes. It's made of alkali, urine and chalk. It's like taking a bath in bleach, only it smells worse. A lot worse.

So, like many Episcopalians before us, we flee from the Old Testament to the New. Where Luke introduces us to the uncomfortable figure of John the Baptist, fiercely preaching a severe gospel of repentance.

Is this Advent or Lent we're going through, anyway?

And is our beloved holiday season really a warning to be afraid, to be very afraid, of the judgment of the Lord?

No. I don't believe that it is.

“Be not afraid,” Jesus says over and over in the Gospels, so I'm pretty sure we don't have to dread his presence in our lives. Whatever Advent means, and these readings mean, it isn't that, as the Calvinist preacher Jonathan Edwards famously warned his own parishioners, “God holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked.” That's very dramatic, and I'm sure it increased the offering that week, but it's bad theology. Even in a week when The New York Times confirms that there have more mass shootings than days this year—it's still bad theology.

The Fourth Gospel tells us that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son,” and did so that we could become children of God. All of us.

The proper response to that good news is joy, but joy with a tinge of awe. We don’t do awe well in our generation. We toss around the word “awesome” as a synonym for “excellent” or “good.” But that’s not awe.

Look around you, at this space we have the honor of worshipping in—the explosions of color and light in the Rose Window, the blending of wood and stone, brick and marble. We’re in a place of celebration, but it’s celebration that has a solemn quality to it. It’s joyful, but it’s a joy that carries deep meaning, and mystery. We’ll never completely understand it, but it’s real and can move our hearts, so that we come back week after week.

Awe can be frightening. And I’m not going to conjure up all the standard nature metaphors—beautiful but terrifying lightning storms, or incredible mountain vistas. Because good though they are, we’re talking about God, and I can’t have a relationship with Niagara Falls or a mountain. They can’t know us, can’t love us the way we are taught, and the way I believe, that God loves us.

No, let’s stick closer to home for this. Think back to the first moment you realized you were in love. Not infatuation. Not desire. The real thing. Now, I can’t speak for anybody but me, but mixed in with that unbelievable joy, that thrill that only the presence of that one special person can bring, is a kind of fear. The fear of being vulnerable. Will she love me back? What happens when he gets to know how insecure I am? Will I get hurt?

That’s awe.

And becoming aware, really taking on board, the love of God carries with it some awe. It’s hard to accept that we are loved by God. It’s especially hard to find room in our busy lives in an increasingly scary world that seems out of joint. With all that, how can we make space for a relationship with a God we can’t see, or touch, or whose voice we can’t hear.

It’s hard to remember the children we once were, and find that kind of spontaneity in ourselves again. And that’s what Advent is for. It’s a time for finding that moment when we feel at one with the world, where we can open ourselves to feelings we so often push to the side.

And how on earth do we do that?

Well, in AA, they have a saying—act as if. Be a part of what’s happening here these next few weeks before Christmas. Stay for coffee afterward; maybe take a tour. Maybe take an active part. There are all kinds of ways, you know—help decorate the church for Christmas, wrap toys to be given to children to fulfill Christmas wishes. Here’s a secret—Community Ministry gives you the opportunity to meet incredible people, both our volunteers but especially our guests, who so often taught me what grace under pressure really is like. If that’s not for you, you can take a class—we have everything from Bible study to yoga classes throughout the week. Or just be here and soak it in, and clear some space for yourself to breathe. And listen. Don’t worry if you don’t hear anything. You will when the time is right for you.

Advent for me is a chance to make that space in life so that we can hear the inmost promptings of the heart, can open ourselves to discovering where our “deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Now, I stole those words. They’re from Frederick Buchner, and they’re the best translation I’ve come upon for what theologians mean when they talk about God calling each of us, clergy and lay, to a special ministry. It’s finding that place, he wrote, “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Some find that place in ordained ministry, as priests, or, as I have, as a permanent deacon. But our lay ministers and volunteers, our altar guild, the incredibly talented musicians who create beauty here every week, are responding to that call. And so are many people whose responses we don't see, because they pursue that calling outside the church walls, and we're here as a community and sustenance for them.

Advent is a bit like Lent, then. It's a chance to stop a bit, recognize that every day the world offers us all chances to find that place and put our deep gladness to work. It's a chance to step back from the rush, and get ready to hear. It's a chance to oppose the cruelties and violence that are so common in our world, and by opposing end them. Not with more violence, but by acts of kindness and a refusal to accept that cruelty and violence establish the norm. They do not. So Advent is not a deadline; it's a process. It's about readiness.

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if it be not now, yet it will come:
the readiness is all.*

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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