

SERMON      ADVENT I      November 27, 2012.

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It's begun. Advent. And how familiar to us are these words:

*For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

Even people who don't go to church know these words if they are fans of Handel's Messiah! This text from Isaiah forms the lyrics for one of the choruses. Can you hear it in your imagination? Listen:

**PLAY 38 second mark end 1:21 for Stivers**

Exhilarating and deeply moving, right? And don't we just want that? - the joy, the anticipation. the beautiful decorations and Christmas lights...

BUT... that's not where we are right now. Right now we're at the beginning of Advent. And instead of lights and beauty, anticipation and delight we are asked to embrace the darkness. To go deeper into it. To dwell there with an open mind, an open heart, awake to see what might come. Not knowing what to expect.

The poet Wendell Berry writes:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light  
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,  
and find that the dark too, blooms and sings,  
and is travelled by dark feet and dark wings.

I think it's time for us to go dark. To go in the dark, ponder the dark, immerse ourselves in the not knowing, the waiting for, the opening to the unexpected. Over and over again every year we do this. Perhaps this is the year we will let go of the light, let go of the familiar, allow ourselves to be cleaned out by the thieves who come in the night so that we are truly emptied out and truly ready to greet the Christ who comes, Emmanuel, God with us.

And to do this we need something to keep us safe, right? Something that reassures and comforts. For we are not asked to go comfortless. So how do we find comfort in the dark? How do we create enough safety for ourselves that we can discover how the dark blooms and sings. It's a great pondering, isn't it! As I mull and ponder on this long darkness that lies ahead of us between here and Christmas I am reminded of a yearly ritual I was part of in Portland, Oregon.

I belonged to a lay Benedictine community of about 30 people connected to the cathedral. We had a tradition that every year, between Christmas and New Years we would get together to read out loud to each other W H Auden's Christmas Oratorio. As we come to this the first day of Advent, this long darkness we are asked to willingly enter into I am reminded of these lines from Auden's libretto:

“He is the Way.  
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;  
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.  
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;  
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.  
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;  
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.”

Now you might hear these words and think - rare beasts? unique adventures? Sign me up! Or you might be a more cautious creature and edge back, saying something like, “so nice of you to think of me but I’m afraid I won’t be able to join you.”

But that’s not where I want to dwell. The words I want to hold up for us to notice are the *verbs* in each of these stanzas - Follow him. Seek him. Love him. And in our Gospel there’s more verbs: Keep awake. Understand. Be ready. All of these words are about choosing. And that’s where hope comes in. We get to choose hope. We get to choose to fasten ourselves to the belief that darkness can be our friend. There are important things for us to learn in this dark place of Advent. And we can find the safety we need in order to make ready for the Prince of Peace who is coming. Coming to bring light to the world.

It all makes me think of how there’s been a few of us who’ve had a journey through the dark lately. We each personally know someone who’s been living with super challenging circumstances in their lives. And if not, we have only to look out into the world where stories abound of people living in the worst of times and in spite of that reaching out to help one another. In our own parish I know of people who’ve faced disheartening events with cheerfulness and a sense of adventure. Sometimes it seems like it’s our elders who have the most courage, the most indomitable spirits, the most spunkiness.

Over and over they choose hope. And I think, what models! And I think I want to be like them when I grow up. Only I don’t want to wait. I want to choose hope now. I want to open myself to the winds of change, open myself to the flowers and songs of the darkness. I want to be truly open and ready for the coming of this radical, counter-cultural Emmanuel. How about you? Do you want this too? Cause he’s coming. He’s coming.

Emmanuel. God with us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.