

Advent is a House with Many Rooms

Sermon for December 1, 2019

1st Sunday of Advent

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*For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.
Matthew 24:38-39*

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

We are now traveling very quickly into the heart of winter. Here in the Northern Hemisphere, the days are getting shorter, the temperature is dropping, and the winter rains have arrived.

We fight back against the dark and cold with festive lights and glittering illuminations. Already our streets and neighborhoods are being transformed into glowing, blinking, sparkling, gleaming cityscapes.

Meanwhile the Church has entered Advent. Advent is a peculiar and almost counter-cultural observance. The First Sunday in Advent in particular always arrives with a bang and dumps a bucket of gloom and doom on our festivities. Year after year, the first Sunday of Advent serves up readings about the end of the world. In those readings, the end of the world is imagined as a sudden, turbulent event in which everything becomes undone. But then again, the world is always ending somewhere and for somebody.

I remember when my world was ending, or at least the world that I knew was ending. My marriage was ending, my sense of self was ending, my whole life was falling apart. I was falling deeper and deeper into a black, bottomless hole. I was heartbroken, I was scared, I was confused, I was very lost, and I did not think that there was any future for me. Other people were going on with their lives, but my world was falling apart.

During that time I joined a women's choir, the Rainbow Women's Chorus, and our choir directors announced that we would sing Christmas songs for our Winter Concert. No way! We rose as one in protest. Lesbians do not sing Christmas Songs! No way! But our directors prevailed, and before long they rolled out a long list of songs for the concert. Then they handed out CDs for us to take home for practice.

And practice I did. I am a terrible singer, and I had to practice a lot. I practiced in the shower, and in the car and while chopping vegetables. One day I drove home from the office, and back then I had a very short commute, 10 or 15 minutes at most, and I was almost home, but the CD in my car had me singing and I couldn't stop. I ended up driving around our block at least 20 times.

The songs ranged from the silly to the sublime, Frosty the Snowman, Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer, Up on the Rooftop. But also French Carols and Latin Carols plus an esoteric song in Japanese which was super-hard to pronounce. There were several nature songs about the turning of the earth, about the stars at night, about thousands of crystal snowflakes silently drifting through the night.

And all this singing did something to me. Slowly, bit by bit, it lifted my mood. It stitched something back together in me. One day I walked into the grocery to buy some soy-milk and in the store they played the same song that I had been practicing. Before long, and without even realizing it, I began to hum along. And with this small act I suddenly felt a bit less isolated, a bit less out of step with the world.

And yet, my world was still falling apart. And so it helped, it really helped to come to church around that time, just when the Church was observing Advent. (Well, I didn't have much of a choice in the matter, after all I was the pastor.)

The Advent observance of the church gave me a space for my grief and for all my chaotic thoughts. It was the one place where I did not feel so out of step with the world. It was the one place where there was no pressure to put on a happy face and a smile.

But then, just when all of the gloom and doom got a bit too much, there were also joyful celebrations: the children created much playful chaos as we rehearsed for the Christmas play; there was the usual mayhem of decorating of the tree, and the camaraderie of going out and singing carols.

And in this way I discovered that Advent is a house with many rooms. In Advent there is a room for every kind of mood.

- If you feel sad and need a space where you are allowed to grieve Advent has that kind of space for you.
- If you are bewildered and out of step with the world, if you need respite from relentless holiday cheer, Advent has that kind of space for you.
- If you feel hurried and rushed, constantly behind with all the things on your do-list, then Advent invites you to slow down and catch your breath.

Advent is a house with many rooms. One of the more remarkable rooms could be called the "Howling Room": When you are so full of hurt that you just want to scream, like a wounded animal, you can go there. And you will discover that many people have visited that room before you. You are not the first who has ever felt this way and you will not be the last. Many prophets, many holy men

and women have been there before you.

O God! O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!, cried Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1)

O God! Give ear to my words and consider my groaning! (Psalm 5:1)

The Church has retained echoes of these heartfelt cries in the Advent Songs: *O Savior, Rend the Heaven's wide!*

And then there is a room which is filled with the scent of pine trees and a magical life force. It could be called the "Evergreen Room". It is a reminder that life has a way of going on, even in the depth of winter. Even when the world is ending, life goes on. The church creates this room by bringing greens into our worship space, and by setting up an Advent Wreath. At the beginning of worship we pause for a moment to bless the wreath, but it is really the wreath which blesses us.

And then there is a room which is flooded with warmth and light. Even the darkest night cannot extinguish this light. The church creates this room by lighting extra candles during Advent, beyond the candles that are usually used for worship.

As we travel deeper into the mystery of Advent, we light an additional candle each Sunday. And we hear the words: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the Glory of God has risen upon you.* (Isaiah 60:1)

Another room could be called "the Waiting Room". Waiting rooms are usually found in doctor's offices, in hospitals, in government buildings, in airports and railways stations; and usually they are filled with people who are tense or anxious or bored. The Advent Waiting Room wants to introduce us to a different kind of waiting. We learn to give ourselves the gift of time: the time we take before we sip from glass of wine; time for smelling and looking at the wine, and not just gulping it down. We learn to take time for whatever task is at hand. And also: to wait before we speak in anger; to wait before we pronounce judgment; to think things through before we jump into action. And finally we learn to wait for God to come alongside us.

And then there is a room where things are very quiet. Everything is hushed. You can hear your heart beat in this room. In this room the whole world stands on tip-toe and holds its breath. The church has done a wonderful job of holding on to this silent room in the midst of a very noisy world. All through Advent, and even on Christmas Eve, this silent room is greatly treasured:

O little town of Bethlehem,

How still we see thee lie!

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep

The silent stars go by...

How silently, how silently,

The wondrous Gift is given!

So God imparts to human hearts

The blessings of His heaven.

Another room could be called the “Vision Room”. Advent brings us visions of a totally different world. *People will beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, nation will not rise against nations, and never again will they learn how to make war.* (Isaiah 2:4)

We heard these words in the first reading today, from the second chapter of Isaiah. Advent is a great time for dreams and visions. As one world is coming to an end, a new world is being born. Advent invites us to pay attention to our dreams, to our hopes for the future. What kind of world do we long for? What kind of life do we pray for? What kind of future do we need?

At this turning of the seasons, on this first Sunday of Advent, what does your soul need?

Do you need quiet time to slow down?

Do you need community?

Do you need space to allow yourself to feel your feelings?

Do you need the reassurance of the evergreens?

Do you need the radiance of the light?

Do you need visions and dreams for tomorrow?

Advent is a house with many rooms. If you have been stuck in one room for a while, or you have lived with one kind of mood for too long, why not open the door and explore another room?

Advent is waiting for you. Just open one of its many doors.

Amen.