

Advent, A Season of Holy Waiting

Advent is an abrupt disruption in our “ordinary time.” It is not only a new season in the Church year; it is an utterly new year, a new time, a call to new life. New possibilities burst forth.

We mark Advent as a new season in the liturgical sequence and we also dare to believe that God is bringing a genuine newness to the world; that God is breaking in to shine a light in the darkness, the darkness of winter and especially the darkness of human suffering.

Advent is not just the lobby or waiting room for Christmas. It is not just a time for clergy to torture their congregations by withholding Christmas Carols or decorations!

Advent is when we remember that God always shines a light to guide us home through the darkness we feel when we fear God has given up on us; Advent is when we join with God in increasing anticipation for a renewal of our lives and world.

In this holy season of waiting and anticipation we are invited to awaken from our numbed endurance and our domesticated expectations. This is when we step out of the daily grind of commercial Christmas and listen intently to God’s will, to God’s hope for the world.

These four weeks are when we assert that though the time of suffering is long, we still believe that God empowers those who love justice, those who extend mercy and have the audacity to unleash compassion.

Most importantly perhaps, Advent asks us to slow down and embrace a holier rhythm, it asks us to get off what I call the go, go, go train and let the world stop spinning long enough to orient ourselves to reality.

We are tempted to move from celebration to celebration — a month of Halloween to three months of Christmas to the Super Bowl, Mardi Gras, Cinco De Mayo...on and on and on we go on this Merry-go-round. When we stop paying attention to our grief or sorrow, we suffer more.

This time that we steal from the secular, commercially-driven calendar keeps us from cheaply proclaiming hope before we’ve adequately waited; until we have garnered the courage to mourn and sit with the ache of longing.

Advent is a gift that we are given a full month before Christmas day to share stillness with a world that careens wildly from moment to moment in an absolute frenzy.

Yet, as Christmas sits out on the horizon, it is still disturbing to hear our scripture in Advent, which have very bleak shadows in them. They are so disturbing that we often simply don’t hear them.

We hear Jesus’ talking about destruction and apocalypse. It’s important to remember that translated literally *apocalypse* simply means a disclosure of something hidden, a lifting of the veil, or a revelation.

The Advent readings are dark, but they are about preparation for a wondrous time, a time of joy, a time of celebration because God will be among us in a new way.

Our sacred stories, which we hear week by week, ask us to hold this tension within us, and not to hide from the darkness, because we know that light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

I want you to pay close attention in these four weeks because our scripture is riddled with this tension. We’ll hear it in John’s preaching in the wilderness, in the disciples of Jesus when John is beheaded. It is in Joseph, when Mary becomes pregnant. Real human pain, dismay, and fear are in these stories—they are human events that happen in all of our lives.

We cannot know light unless we first know darkness. Advent asks us to know the darkness, to name it and embrace it with understanding; to courageously proclaim that it is only in the darkness that the light can shine.

It is hard to wrest our attention away from the sparkling lights and green wreaths and crazy running around. But Christmas is about profound change coming into the world, and yet, more than any other time of year, we resist the need to prepare for God's newness. Jesus prepares us for the unpredictable by talking about the unexpected hour. And as much as we work to tame Christmas and adorn it, to enclose it in secular ritual and keep it confined in familiar carols, its essential wildness will not be reined in.

So that is why on this first Sunday of Advent, as the culture buzzes about jingle bells and store wide sales, we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We sing of our longing like a prayer from our gut. We sing from our weary, shivering souls, for our friends and for the world and for ourselves.

Advent gives us the permission to rest and wait. We sit bravely in the shadow of doubt as the world goes Christmas crazy around us.

Advent reminds us to throw off our self-imposed fears and limitations, wake up, and claim God's hope as a present and eternal reality.

As Oswald Chambers said, "Advent is a time to expect great things *from* God and attempt great things *for* God."

Happy Advent, Stephanie+