

The Gift of Being Alert

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Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

Given the miracles of technology and the necessities of the schedule, I am recording this before Thanksgiving. Nonetheless, I hope that wherever and however and with whomever you marked this best of holidays that it was blessed, and that you found opportunities for gratitude, in the midst of the uncertainty and anxiety of our moment.

And now we turn to Advent, a season of waiting and preparation and anticipation leading to Christmas. This year the word you will hear most often is “gift.” With that word, I don’t mean matching cars in the driveway with big red bows, or the latest toy that it takes all night to assemble – though I am not criticizing any of that whatsoever. By gift I mean moments, relationships, experiences, opportunities, that by receiving them are we drawn ever closer to the holy, or ever closer to our better selves, or ever closer to love. You may have received already in printed form a kind of Advent and Christmas program guide and devotional; if you didn’t, let us know. If you read the entries from members and staff you will understand, even without prompting, what this kind of gift might look like.

I think of the great third verse of Phillips Brooks’ “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.” This will be a year of silent gifts, I believe, literally and symbolically, as we seek to connect when we can’t physically, as we find ways to extend love and care and compassion in the face of all that we are experiencing.

At the outset of Advent, with Christmas around the corner and Thanksgiving barely in our rearview mirror, I’d invite us to share unexpected and priceless gifts that would otherwise never find themselves on Santa’s list. And be open – be

open to receiving such gifts, the ones from unexpected places, the ones in any other year we might take for granted, lost as they might be in the frenzy and bedazzlement. Prepare, anticipate, giving and receiving silent gifts, humble gifts, precious gifts.

And thank you to all who have pledged thus far. Again, given the timing of things, we are just processing the first round of pledges so will be able to report progress more completely in a few days. But thank you – and thanks in advance to all who are sending their pledges in. Together we are “walking in faith.”

I am a geek, or nerd, for all things church. That includes church signs. The first church I served, a small neighborhood church on Chicago’s Northside, had an old-school sign in front, with metal letters that fit into slots. You’ve seen signs like it a million times. Because we were a small and multi-tasking bunch, it was my job to change the sign each week, to put up the carefully-considered sermon title, as if a carefully-considered sermon title would get people in the door. It took me a good long time to do it, until finally I realized that I didn’t have to, that I could invest that time in actually writing that carefully-considered sermon. So I hid the letters and life went on happily.

Even so, I appreciate creativity, and even whimsy, on church signs, as long as someone else is changing the letters. There are bad ones, of course. Bad theology, scary theology, boring messages. But there are good ones:

- A long time ago in a Galilee far, far away
- Tweet others as you want to be tweeted
- Jesus is coming; look busy
- Blah blah blah...just come to church

Even in the face of COVID, there is still creativity, and whimsy:

- Fear not, God/ love one another, Jesus/ wash your hands, CDC
- A time for war, a time for peace, a time to stay at home
- Shout hosanna, except do it 6 feet away
- Give us clean hands and Purell hearts

Other than your steeple, the first thing I noticed when I first visited you was your sign. It had to be noticeable; it had to be consistent with your architecture; it had to be compelling in its message. It does all of those things, so well done! I take it both as invitation and mission statement: The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill – An Inclusive Community of Faith.

All this sign talk has a point, a church sign I drove past a year or so ago, in front of a church whose name will remain un-mentioned. “It’s not Christmas, it’s Advent,” the sign said. I felt like I was being yelled at by that sign. “It’s not Christmas, it’s Advent.” I get the point, and I will speak to the point in a moment. But if a sign is to entice you, that sign might have enticed me to keep right on going, if not to a Starbucks, then at least to another church.

Nevertheless, it *is* Advent, and not Christmas. They are different, at least in the life of the church. But they are not unrelated. One leads to another. One is a season of preparation, of anticipation, of expectation that flows into the next. We will observe Advent around here, and rightly so. We will light the Advent candles and sing the Advent hymns in their minor keys and wear purple both as sign of royalty and solemnity. We will read passages from the prophets and John the Baptist and pay attention to the interplay of first coming and second coming. We will treat the next four weeks as a season of preparation. And we will do so with a deeper poignancy, I believe, in a COVID Advent, more so than we might in a “normal” year, whatever normal is.

But along with the tone of that church sign that I saw, I would want to have a discussion about its content. We *are* preparing for Christmas. We *are* anticipating the birth of the Christ child. We *are* expecting love incarnate to be born and to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. It is true that church-y types can take this a bit far, as if you are committing some kind of theological crime if you talk about the baby Jesus too soon, if you slip a Christmas carol into the liturgy. You are not. We are not. And this year, especially, if we need to get to Christmas a little sooner, if we need to let the Advent and Christmas messages mingle a bit more than we might, then by all means.

I understand the critique lodged by those who are shocked, shocked, when the stores have their Christmas displays out sometime around Labor Day. I get that – I really do. But in 2020, I am willing to let a whole lot slide as we find ways to deal with our collective trauma and grief, our anxiety and isolation, our stress and anxiety. If hearing “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” coming out of the speakers at Target helps as your glasses fog up above mask, then by all means.

But the fussiness and legalism about Advent is not the point, nor is the counter-point the point. The real issue for me is not getting to Christmas too soon, or even getting to Christmas unprepared. The real issue for me is getting to Christmas and missing the point.

The prophet Isaiah begs God to come down now. Come down now, God. Make the mountains shake. Make your enemies tremble. Chasten us. Correct us. Cleanse us. The prophet realizes that we are not getting this right and that we deserve God’s judgment.

But notice the transition. Gloom and doom become hopeful possibility. “We sinned and you were angry” becomes “we are clay, ready to be shaped and formed.”

Walter Brueggemann writes that this “prayer exhibits two main features of genuine Advent hope: on the one hand a deep sense of desperation about a situation out of control...(and) on the other hand, a bold and confident trust in God is voiced...Life with God can be completely transformed. That is the urgent hope...” Brueggemann writes that “The prayer of God’s coming, which began in bombast, ends on a note of needful, pathos-filled intimacy. In the end, Advent focuses not on God’s massive power, but on God’s ... sense of solidarity.” (*Texts for Preaching, Year B, pages 2-4*)

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is well into his adult ministry. He is talking about a future time, a time of gloom and suffering. Jesus is here, now, but he will go away in order to come back. His earliest followers did not fully grasp this; nor do we. But we do understand his ultimate point. "But about that day or hour no one knows,

neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come...keep awake..."

Beverly Gaventa writes that "the return of the Son of Man and the crises associated with that return are not events subject to human control or prediction. Disciples must be constantly on the alert for that return, or they will be caught unprepared....watchfulness," Gaventa writes, "is necessary because only God knows what time it really is..." She concludes: "As the people of God wait even now, they can anticipate only that the times are in God's hands and not their own. They know that God will not leave them alone, that God will not leave them without hope." (Pages 8-10)

I said that the real issue for me is not getting to Christmas too soon, but in getting to Christmas and missing the point.

That's why we who are carriers of this story, who are living in the world to make a difference, do need the time and space to prepare as faithfully as we can. That is what Advent is about.

Advent is a four-week season, but it is also a continual rhythm of watchfulness and preparedness, of getting ready for God to come into the world. Just as Christmas is a continual rhythm of birth and new life, so Advent continually prepares us for good news by inviting us to keep awake, keep alert, to watch for the signs, so that we can be ready to challenge what needs challenging, and be ready to welcome what needs welcoming.

That is why we need Advent – your heart needs it and mine; the church needs it; and the world needs it, whether it knows it or not. It's not Christmas, it's Advent. But Christmas is coming. Be awake. Be alert – ready to receive the gift, and then to share it with our broken and fearful world. Amen.