

Advent and Signs

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December 18, 2022 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

*Hello COVID my old friend
You came to visit me again
The coughs and sneezes that were lurking
Are mostly gone, the booster's working
I'm feeling so much better, thanks for asking.
Yet I'm still masking
To say goodbye to 'rona*

Poetry can save your life, the poet Maurice Saatchi wrote. I don't know if that's true. (I don't even know if poetry can save a sermon!) But I do know that poetry can deepen a conversation about faith and the meaning of this season. This morning's poems will bear re-reading; we will send them out in tomorrow's "On Faith" church-wide email. As we think about the themes of Advent, hear this lovely poem by Mary Oliver, called, simply, "Advent Poem."

"Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but
still nothing is as shining as it should be
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an
uproar of mice – it is the season of their
many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves
and through the walls the squirrels
have gnawed their ragged entrances – but it the season
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And
the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard
while the dog snores, the cat holds the pillow;
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly
up the path, to the door. And I still believe you will
come, Lord; you will, when I speak to the fox,
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know
that I am really speaking to you whenever I say,
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in."

In the face of all that is, seven days before Christmas, the shopping and wrapping, the cooking and the cleaning, and the deeper busy-ness and pressure and anxiety about health and

relationships and work and global matters and having just the “right” Christmas, how are we preparing the space that is our soul, the space that is our heart, the space that is our church, so that we can say “come in, come in.”

There are signs everywhere of what this preparation can look like. Even this week, as we sent food and gifts to our mission partners, signs of a response and more so signs of need and our ongoing and ever-deepening call to respond, our Matthew 25 call to respond. The signs taken down from the walls of Widener Hall, portraits of gun violence victims, who must become more than portraits as we are called to respond in the name of the prince of peace. Signs as we sang Christmas carols yesterday afternoon and will do so this afternoon, to our members and their neighbors, including those unable to gather with us in person, reminders of the call to compassion and care.

There are other signs. This Wednesday, December 21, is the longest night. Churches will hold longest night services, sometimes called “Blue Christmas” services. Not only will the departed be mourned, but an acknowledgement will happen, and an important one. This season is not always magical.

(Parenthetically, “magical” is the word most used to describe Christmas in Hallmark movies, one or two of which I may have watched in my Covid isolation this week. I also learned that you want to be the guy wearing the flannel shirt in those movies, and not the suit and tie. Suit and tie guy never gets the girl, and always loses the deal and heads back to live in the city while the new couple, originally mismatched or star-crossed, end up living in Candy Cane Woods or Hot Chocolate Canyon or Holiday Creek or something. It’s an escape, I get it, and it’s always magical. But I digress.)

In real life, we seek to make Christmas magical, and Christmas *is* a blessed gift and can be filled with many, many good things. But not always, and not for everyone. So, look for the signs, and reach out, connect, when you can, to those for whom this season can be rough, who are struggling, and if you are struggling, reach out, and seek help for yourself if it is needed.

Throughout Advent, we have heard the words of the prophets, including the prophet Isaiah this morning. These words are so much more than magical. They are transformative, even when they are not easy.

Along with the prophetic call, at the same time, we have had John the Baptist’s in- your-face and less than magical declaration of the way things are. To think about how the world is and how God envisions it to be is not to get lost in the hopelessness of this moment, but rather is to be drawn into the deeper hope of working for change, working, with others, for change, working, with God, for change, because God loves this world so much that love came down in this improbable, vulnerable form.

I remember a children’s sermon I heard long ago about signs. The minister spoke of a stop sign. It was the thing you paid attention to, but it wasn’t really the thing that made the car stop. I

remembered that. A thing that matters, but that is not the thing itself, that points to something else.

So, I've been thinking about signs. As much as I love GPS, and still rely on it as streets end abruptly around here and then reappear miles later, nothing beats a sign to tell you where you are and where you are headed. But you have to read them and use them and trust them. Give us a sign, O God. There are signs all around us, if only we can be open to them. Signs, signs, everywhere signs.

The prophet Isaiah is impatient. The people are not getting it, as they say, in restoring and renewing their relationship to God. Their lack of urgency troubles Isaiah, so he encourages the king to ask God for a sign. The king will not. So, the prophet, doing what prophets do best – takes matters into his own hands, providing the kind of irritation and consoling that moves the people of God along. The prophet insists – in God's voice – that the people need a sign to assure them of God's presence, God's power. A young woman is with child and shall bear a son and name him Immanuel. His wisdom will be mighty, and he will help you discern the difference between good and evil. A sign. Not God – but pointing to God, if only we discern and pay attention.

And today. This Sunday is typically Mary's Sunday. We get Matthew's version of things, which focuses on Joseph. Luke focuses on Mary much more – and the Christmas pageant we will observe in just a few days is kind of a patchwork quilt of the two, plus more than that.

Isaiah's prophecy called the baby Immanuel, God with us. The angel speaks of the baby's name as well – Jesus – meaning "savior." All of this to fulfill a sign, we are told. Perhaps *the* sign. Reaching back from the Jesus story to the prophet, then reaching forward, to us. Everywhere, signs, if we pay attention, and take the leap of faith to follow. Not the thing itself, but pointing to that thing. Not making things happen, but encouraging us to live in certain ways, and not in other ways. Discerning the signs of the times.

Advent is about recognizing signs. Christmas is about following them. The centuries old "O Antiphons" are the basis for the hymn we will shortly sing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We are hungry for signs. We need them. We look for them. O come, Emmanuel. O come, dayspring. O come desire of nations. O come, wisdom. O come, root of Jesse, key of David, dawn of the east. O come. We need signs. To follow. To discern. To give us hope. And when every other sign failed, or fails, we now have this sign – God with us – God incarnate – God in human form, in the flesh.

And just to make the point that the signs we often look for are not the signs we need, and therefore not the signs God offers, we receive this sign first in the voice of a prophet, that we work so hard to ignore. It comes to an unlikely man, a wilderness man. And today, it comes to a man seeking to be honorable, to do the right thing. And it comes to an unsuspecting, scared, quizzical yet amazingly faithful and courageous young woman who will be the God-bearer, who will deliver that most unexpected sign, a humble baby who will rule the world and make all the difference. When we need a sign, we get one, the one we need, even though it's not the one

we expect, nor the one we think we need. Have we the vision to discern, and the hope to follow?

Hear Denise Levertov's poem called "Annunciation."

'Hail, space for the uncontained God'

From the Agathistos Hymn, Greece, VIc

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.
God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?
Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.
More often
those moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.
God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept
like any other child – but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
only asked
a simple, ‘How can this be?’
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel’s reply,
perceiving instantly
the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power –
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.
Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love –

but who was God.

May we have the courage to prepare whatever needs preparation. May we have the wisdom to discern the annunciations in our lives. May we have the courage to see the signs and to follow them.

And may every blessing of this season, and the grace of the one whose birth we so joyfully anticipate, be with you, and those you love, until that grace spills over into all the world. Merry Christmas. Amen.