

“Advent, Expectations and Arrivals – the Sabbatical Journey”

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It is that time again. A time when we begin our march into a very familiar season. A season that clashes with two different stories and presents two different faces. We begin to see both a lightness of spirit and dark nights of the soul. We're promised warmth but often asked to risk a little coldness to find it. See generous sharing that sometimes requires us to pay a great price. It is a time of discovering mythic journeys around us and lots of presents around us. It is a magical, marvelous, demanding and confusing time.

It's known in the Christian calendar as advent. A word that, at first glance, does nothing to reduce the confusion of the holiday. It doesn't refer specifically to either stories of pregnant virgins or holiday discounts at the malls. It's derivation, borrowed from Latin, shows it to be a combination of two words – ad, which means 'to'; and 'venire' which means 'come.' Advent simply asks us 'to come.' Drop what we're doing, let go of familiar routines, release ourselves from the traditional to-do list that make our lives so busy that there is never any room at the inn. Advent asks us to imagine more. To cast our gaze above the din and look out for something new. It announces the presence of the holy ahead of us.

I am, of course, referring to advent as the familiar march toward the season of Christmas. But in another sense I want to talk about the march toward another season. One not nearly as familiar to us. But equally demanding and confusing. Bound with the same kind of trepidation. But one also promising a wealth of discovery, even if it comes at great price. This morning I hope to say something of advent as the journey into the upcoming sabbatical.

It may seem an odd comparison. But I have thought a lot about it of late, and it seems really no more ill-matched than trying to connect the journey to Bethlehem with our traditional journey to the malls. Of traveling through the dark, following a star in hopes of finding a good sale. Or seeking the birth of the holy among us with the practice of giving more than we think we can afford?

As a young boy I was very excited about Christmas. I had no trouble blending the two stories. I used to love turning on the lights of the tree and watching them twinkle upon the tiny crèche we had on our mantle. I remember the magic of how the presents seemed to miraculously appear – carried by the wise men (ground delivery) and Santa (air express) - for Christmas morning. And mostly, the sense of hope – anticipation - that something amazing was going to come.

Of course, I didn't have to do anything to prepare for that when I was young. It sort of all happened without much effort from my part. No going out in the dark and cold for me.

It was a little different for me as a boy than I experience it now. Then, I had none of the sense of trepidation, of expenditure, of effort to balance the promise of hope. I suppose I should have appreciated the free ride a bit more. But, that free-ness also came with a price. Back then it also seemed like there was also no sense of lingering joy after the holidays - after the last present was opened and the last piece of pumpkin pie eaten, it felt like a big let down. When all the external stimuli ended, there was little internal joy left lingering. Just me waiting another 364 days for someone to come stuff my stocking.

That was to change over the years. Advent would eventually become much more personal. And the process began to be more confusing as the clash in the two stories - Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and the notion of mounds of presents on Christmas morning - was presented to me. I can remember for several years my minister in Sunday school would recount the journey of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wisemen, trying to convince us of the trepidation the young couple must have felt as they began the long journey to Bethlehem, and the circumstances that made it so hard. I just didn't get it. "What are they waiting for?" I would wonder. "Follow the star! There's presents there! You heard the angel. Go to Bethlehem, find the stable, have the baby. Then the kings come and give you presents. Get a move on. Be not afraid!"

I just didn't get it. It seemed to me that going there was the good part. It was the coming back home that I imagined being a drag. After the party broke up and all the presents were opened. Then having to lug home all that loot? And clean their room so they'd have a place to put it all when they got back. Going seemed easy.

But I guess I never got the whole concept of advent because it was never me who was asked to go. I never had to leave the familiar and venture into the dark. All I had to do was to read along with the script from home. Do what I always did. Follow the routine. Wait around - don't pout, don't cry, don't shout... blah, blah, blah. Then get the presents. It became pretty predictable. It wasn't new. In fact, after a while, it got sort of old.

It began to change when I noticed my parents - and the other adults - were getting far fewer presents but a whole lot more satisfaction out of the deal. That struck me. I noticed that. And began to pay attention. Not only to what I was getting. But to where I was being called to go. What I was called to give. Suddenly, the journey of the Christmas story became much more interesting to me. The effort expended. The risk taken. Sacrifices made. And it was then - and forever since - that I first began to notice - and make sense - of the kinds of gifts that were being given. The gifts that were not always noticed or accounted for.

I'm not just talking about the frankincense and myrrh. But about the other gifts. The ones I didn't see at first.

Take for example the story early in Luke where the angel comes to visit Mary.

And the angel came in onto her and said, “Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.”

...and Mary looked up at him...

The gospel says “...she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be...”

Or, in other words, ‘what the heck are you saying?!?’ This is supposed to be some kind of favor? Some gift? You’re going to make me ‘great with child’ and then leave town and this is a good thing? And that’s all you have to say, ‘be not afraid’?

Mary eventually conceded. But you can bet a lengthy discussion took place.

When I first approached the board about the idea of a sabbatical, it was after lengthy discussion. Seeing how UUMAN had grown - not only in numbers but in ideas and vision – it felt like there was this great fount of strength and power ready to spill forth. But it was a sometimes hesitant strength. Frequently uncertain. It seems, over the years, routines had formed and systems came into place where decisions and authority shifted to become somewhat localized. This is predictable in almost every church. Since although there are some churches with ministers and church leaders who are control freaks and lust for power, there is usually a much more common method for determining who has authority and takes leadership. It is called the ‘fogging the mirror test.’ When something needs doing, and someone qualified is needed, a candidate is found, they are handed a mirror and told to breath on it. If their breath fogs the mirror, they get the job. It’s not rocket science – nor is it a very good model for selecting leadership. One of the reasons being, that the mirror is kept at the church where often, the minister is the only one around. And since the minister is usually filled with a lot of hot air, he rarely has a problem creating a good fog. And this means a good deal of the decisions and authority fall to him.

Over the course of five and a half years, it began to feel like I was being asked to put my blessing on things more and more. I started to wonder if my presence was becoming more hindering than a helpful in our goal for a shared leadership. If I was causing more paralysis than instilling purpose in people and distributing power. I also began to realize that I didn’t really want – and certainly don’t deserve – all of the power and authority that is handed to me. I wondered – if this church is one of shared ministry – where leadership brings with it the capacity for individual and communal transformation, why not hand back some of the power that had fallen to me over the years? So I began to forge this idea that it would be a gift to the congregation to let go of the reigns for a while. Not long. But long enough for people to get a handle on the daily decisions and the important questions that determine our direction – and our future.

you can probably imagine how when I told all this to the board, they struggled to see this as a gift in the same way I did. The conversation went something akin to the one between the Angel and Mary. I remember the time when the issue of sabbatical came up

on the board agenda last year. Merri Beth, the president at the time, turned to me, put her fingers in the sign of a cross and hissed at me.

She gave me the same look I imagine Mary gave the angel. Again, from Luke:

...she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be...

Or, in other words, ‘what the heck are you saying?!?’ We are ‘great with child’ and you leave town and this is a good thing? And you have the nerve to say, ‘be not afraid.’ The story of advent is learning how to see the overlooked gifts as important. For they are the ones that often convey love and trust.

In the gospel of Matthew, we come across another advent conversation with the Angel. This one between the angel and Joseph. Joseph had discovered that Mary had become pregnant and he knew at least that he was still a virgin. As the bible put it, ‘Joseph was minded to put her away privily’ – a nice way of saying that he was gonna dump her. But the angel came to him and said, ‘be not afraid,’ for the child is a gift unto the people for he will remove their suffering.’ Advent is learning to see overlooked gifts as important.

I remember a recent conversation with a couple who loved the church and were considering joining and then found out that I was going on sabbatical. Then they weren’t sure. I tried to tell them that my leaving was actually a gift. That the thing I’ve found which gives people the greatest satisfaction in joining a church is to know that they are a needed and valued part of community. I explained that this next period of time was a great opportunity to find a place where their energy and talents could find a place and where they could become known. They just looked up at me, struggling to see the gift in what I was describing.

Of course, the most famous passage in Luke is with the shepherds, “minding their flocks by night.” The angel comes round about them and they are sore afraid. But the angel says, ‘Be not afraid’ and tells them of a gift – ‘tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people.’ And the shepherds are directed to lead their flocks into the town to witness a birth. They went and told the people gathered in the manger what they saw.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

How do we see these things as gifts? How can advent – that call to come, out of our comfort and our routine, out of our usual roles and guide our people to a place we’ve never been before – how can that be a gift?

That is the question most of the shepherds of this congregation began asking after talk of the sabbatical spread. The shepherds here, as you might have guessed, are the chairs of our committees – the people who are in place, keeping watch over the flocks by night. These are the people who look after our children, watch our finances, move our programs

along, oversee of our membership, respond to those who are hurt or grieving. These are the ones who make sure our justice programs happen, arrange for our worship, present our music, reach out to other churches, coordinate with the mountain, contact district and denominational people. In other words, the people responsible for most of what happens around here.

If you're familiar with the gospel story, you'll know that all the other people who were sent to Bethlehem were summoned by a single angel. But to the shepherds, it required a 'multitude of the heavenly host' to do the job. One measly angel messenger would never be enough to convince this group to 'be not afraid.' These gifts had to be more obvious.

And great work was undertaken to prepare to make them obvious. A new worship associates team was created to carry forth the planning of Sunday services. An expanded pastoral care structure was developed that included Friends on the journey, care circles and healing group, to address the care needs of the congregation. A new music committee began to coordinate our Choir, quartet singers, instrumentalists, drummers and music director. The integration team, the greeters, the covenant group leaders and the adult RE people became ready to guide the membership process. Welcoming Congregation folks, the Mountain people, the Art Auction people who helped project Open Hand who are leading our outreach efforts. Teaching teams, youth liaisons, intergenerational folks who guide children and youth programs. They are the Hearts Desire Auction folks, canvass people, wedding coordinators, bookkeepers and money counters who lead us in our fund-raising and financial efforts. The list managers, newsletter folks, website people who guide our communications. And the board, the policy governance team, the Raising the Roof Folks and the Long Range Planning folks who address our organizational needs.

A heavenly host has been assembled for our shepherds and their message is 'be not afraid.' For the gift they offer is the reassurance that even in leaving the familiar place they have been, they travel not alone.

It was the willingness of all those many people to answer the advent call to let go of their preoccupations and come together that made it necessary to make room at the end. It was their coming together, in the end, that allowed something holy to be born. A willingness to look above the din and see something new – in themselves. The ability to look at one another and see the presence they wanted most. A presence which promised to sustain them long after the night is ended and the journey is over. A presence powerful enough to summon wise men bearing gifts. For in a land that is so divided, only fools ignore people who follow the call to come together.

I didn't understand when I was younger the gift of advent. I struggled for years, trying to see the holy from home waiting for the gifts to arrive. But those gifts never changed my life. Not like when I first answered the call to make my presence known to others. For that is when I first became willing to receive gifts that came with a great price. That is where I was first handed a mirror and asked to breathe on it. And noticing, as it fogged

up, I was being given a great gift. The opportunity to see what I really had to offer. And who I really was.

I hope, in this coming sabbatical, that is a gift you will not overlook. For it is the only real gift this church has to offer.

It is advent now. And the call is to you. Come. Prepare to make of yourself a gift. Come. Be not afraid. Come.

To the Glory of Life.

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