

The Rev. Jonathan R Thomas

December 17, 2017

Is. 61:1-4, 8-11 & Jn 1:6-8,19-28

Waiting and Knowing

When I looked at the lectionary readings for this advent and saw that we got another week of John the Baptist readings, it was like Christmas had come early. Everyone always says, “can we hear more from that crazy guy in the desert who wears camel hair clothes and eats locust and wild honey.” But sometimes the advent lectionary is like the church’s white elephant gift exchange, and if you can’t give away the readings to another preacher, you are just stuck with what you’ve drawn. So here we find ourselves, deep into December, a week from Christmas Eve, and still no mention of Jesus, not even the promise to Mary. Just a lonely man standing in the wilderness telling us to make straight the paths and prepare the way.

As I thought about this week’s reading, and my impatience for something a little more Christmas-y in nature, I remembered a conversation I had my first year as a priest. At my first church, one of my duties was overseeing the 5:30 Sunday evening services, which met in the youth center and was promoted as a more contemporary “come as you are” service, complete with a five member band. I worked well with the band leader, a guy appropriately named Christian. We had similar backgrounds, both growing up in evangelical traditions, but leaving them in college and eventually finding our way to working in an Episcopal Church. We were preparing for Advent, and he asked me when in Advent we could start singing the normal Christmas carols during the service. And I said, how about that time in Advent when it actually becomes Christmas. He said the songs were already being played on the radio and people expected them, and he didn’t grow up with liturgical seasons so he didn’t understand the point.

Well, that was the opening I needed, because just having graduated from seminary the spring before, I was prepared to explain to him in what I assure you was a very thorough and theologically astute way, making note of all the historical precedent and liturgical reasoning, that the season of Advent is where we wait expectantly for the coming of Christ, so we don’t sing songs about baby Jesus already being with us. I went on to tell him how we have these wreaths with these four candles, all representing different things, counting down the four weeks of Advent, and the importance of the colors, and that waiting was good for our souls (that might have been laying it on a little thick), and so we put off singing Christmas carols in church until the actual Christmas season, and that about the only Christmas carol that I could think of that was seasonally appropriate was “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” Well, when I finished my intellectual tour-de-force on all things Advent, Christian was, shall we say, nonplussed by my very erudite mini-lecture. He looked around to make sure no was standing too closely, and then leaned in like he was going to tell me the secret about Santa Claus, and said, “Now I don’t want to offend you, but you Episcopalians know he has already come right – baby, manger, angels, wise men, gospels – all of it already occurred. Jesus came. So in the carols we’re singing about things that already happened.”

Christian was right, of course, in a way. God has already come into our world. We proclaim it all the time. None of our sacraments would make any sense if we didn’t think God

was already among us. And yet we still live waiting for that to be fully realized. It is the same way that we acknowledge that the resurrection has already occurred, and yet at every funeral we await that reality to become fully realized. Jesus already brought the light of God into the world, and yet we still live too often in the reality of darkness. Advent is the time of deep tension between the present experience of darkness, and the very real hope of light. It is about the courage to sit in the darkness and believe that light is still coming. It is a time to remind us how we can live in a world of anger and hatred and still proclaim that love endures. And Advent is when we try to do it in a way that doesn't make us sound like a crazy man standing in the desert yelling about the one who is to come.

It can sound crazy in today's world to proclaim the basic tenets of Christianity. For instance, I know that the fear of gun violence is real and I am sometimes less sure about the promise of peace. I know that every institution seems to be failing at the moment and every leader giving us reason to be skeptical, and faith seems like a scarce commodity, if not downright naive. I know that anger and hatred are pervasive, whether they be in the forms of insidious sexism and racism that we have seen called out in recent months, or simply the demonizing of people who disagree with us as a regular way of doing business, and it seems like love conquering all is a pipe dream. Advent is about recognizing the full weight of the darkness, and still proclaiming our hope in the coming of the light. Advent is about the tension between anxiety and hope.

Brother Curtis from the Society of St. John the Evangelist said recently that hope is simply converted anxiety. By that he didn't mean that anxiety isn't real, that it was a lack of faith, or anything vaguely like that. He meant that anxiety is the very real feeling of sitting amongst the darkness and feeling that it might overwhelm, and what it needs is for someone to help reorient the person, the very situation, toward the light, to give them the hope that there is a limit to the darkness, and its end is light and love. What our overly anxious world needs is John the Baptist reminding people of the ancient promise that "*all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*" Salvation means healing and wholeness in Greek. What people need is someone who is willing to walk into the darkness and hold their hand, and who in that place can remind them of the promise of healing and wholeness and point them toward that light of that future reality. We don't rush straight to Christmas because it would fail to acknowledge the reality of the darkness that is the lived reality of so many people, and we would also miss out on the reminder that we are to be the ones that point people toward the light of Christ.

We need the practice of lighting our Advent wreaths and watching the flames grow each week. We need the repetition of saying the Advent prayers to ourselves – "Stir up your power O Lord and with great might come among us." We need the practice because we are called to become the ones who will go into the world and make people believe in the miracle of Christmas, in the reality of God among us. It takes work, and practice, and steady reminders to get us there, but that is where we must go.

We must be the ones who comfort those who mourn, who go to the brokenhearted and offer to bind them up their weary and wounded souls, who set people free from what is holding them captive, who can honestly proclaim good news to the oppressed, and who go to the places of ashes, and make new life a reality. We have the season of Advent because Christmas as a holiday is fun and everyone loves it, but Christmas as an idea, that God is truly come among us, seems far-fetched to many and a downright cruel joke to some, and we need some time to

prepare, to be reminded that in a crooked world we need to help make the paths straight so that others might actually be able to see Jesus coming into their lives, know what that could possibly look like, and hope in it again.

That is what Advent is for, and it is important as a season because we need the time and the reminder to get ready to proclaim the light and love of Jesus Christ among us. But we are deep into Advent, and Christmas waits for no one, so get ready. The world knows that the darkness is real, it needs people to help it believe in the light again. People everywhere live in deep anxiety, they need a community that can help reorient them toward hope. John the Baptist began the work, but it is ours to take up now, so that all flesh may see the salvation of the Lord. Amen.