

Advent 1, Year A: 28 November 2010

Today we find ourselves once again on the opening day of Advent, the first day of a new year in the turning of the Church calendar. Looking around the church, we see the traditional signs of the season: blue vestments and hangings, simple greens, the Advent wreath. What does it mean when we light another candle each Sunday, first one, then two, then three, then four; when we switch from the vibrant green of the Sundays after Pentecost to the more subdued deep blue? Just what do these observances suggest to you? Anything at all deeper than “well, we’ve always done that”? I hope you see them as markers pointing to a ritual of waiting and wonder.

Oddly enough, the Church year, the liturgical calendar, doesn’t start with something that has happened, such as Christ’s birth or resurrection – something from the past that becomes present once again. Instead, it begins with a strange emptiness, a strange sense of expectation. The Church year starts with waiting and wonder.

We wait and wonder.
Unless we do this, we will find no real reason for celebration.
Waiting and wondering are signs of a heart that lives,
a heart that remains open to God.
Yet waiting and wondering aren’t talked about much.
They are not much honored in our culture of busyness.

Who are the people in this world who wait?
They are powerless people.
Those who have no choice but to wait.
The possibility of becoming one of these people makes us uncomfortable.
Who are the people in this world who wonder?
They are small children.
Their eyes widen with wonder.
The prospect of behaving in this way makes us uncomfortable, too.

To have it made in today’s society means *not* waiting, *not* wondering.
Making it means you are too busy to wait, too important.
Making it means you are too smart to wonder, too adult.
We want it all now.
We find it impossible to wait for anyone or anything.
And surprises make us uncomfortable.
We avoid experiences of wonder.
It’s easy to screen them out.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

But what makes us so afraid?
What keeps our pace so fast, our vision so narrow?
Why do we avoid waiting and wondering
as though they were a turn down a one-way street marked DO NOT ENTER?
Perhaps it is because waiting and wondering open us to the possibility
that current arrangements are not here to stay, are not permanent.
Waiting and wondering make us realize that solid structures
(for which we have worked so diligently)
can come apart and might give way to something unexpected.

So waiting and wondering provide the Church year with a powerful start.
We are disoriented, as though we were spinning in a circle.
We experience both dread and delight.
To wait and to wonder do not prepare us for the blank spaces on a new calendar.
They do not train us to keep a schedule.
Instead, waiting and wondering prepare us for a life where God acts,
where the unexpected future is unfolded as if it were a mysterious treasure map --
which, of course, it is.

When we accept the Advent's invitation to wait and wonder,
we find ourselves in good company,
with others who have tasted dread and delight.
There are many such people here in the Advent story.
This week Jesus tells his disciples he will return at an unexpected time.
He will arrive like a burglar breaking into a house.
The disciples are left to wait and wonder.

Next week, John the Baptist announces that someone is coming
whose shoes, John says, he is not worthy to shine,
somebody who is going to set things straight -- big time!
Those listening to John can only wait and wonder.

On the Third Sunday of Advent we meet John again,
locked in a prison cell, agonizing over the identity of Jesus.
Is Jesus the promised one or not?
John waits and he wonders.

Then, on this season's final Sunday, Joseph hears in a dream
that Mary's scandalous pregnancy will somehow fulfill God's purpose.
Joseph arises to wait and wonder.

Will you and I wait? Will we wonder?
Not only now, in Advent, but during all the days to come?
What opportunities will we have?

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For some of us, especially this close to the country,
there comes that winter night when newly fallen snow
makes the world small and quiet,
and crisp, cold greets us in the face.
We will leave boot prints behind us in the snow.
The black sky hosts only a few small silver stars.
It's easy then to wait and wonder.

Another opportunity comes once the services have been celebrated,
the gifts opened, the dinner eaten,
and in the living room the decorated tree is left to stand guard.
Tired and at peace, we may choose to go to bed for a Christmas nap.
And when we lie down, we are not only people in our prime,
but the old men and women we may become, and the children we once were.
About to drift off into black velvet slumber,
we may wait and wonder for a moment about the Christ
who was, and is, and ever shall be –
the beginning and end of all our dreams.

The candles of Advent, the greens, the hangings and vestments –
all of them invite us to wait, to wonder, to look for Christ.
Legend tells us he was born in an obscure cave in Bethlehem
and that he will come with great glory when this world folds up forever.
Now he is hidden where he can be found only by those who wonder and wait.
So this Advent I suggest you try to make room in your busy schedule.
Light the candles of the Advent wreath
and follow its cycle of preparation, week by week.
If you can, down scale your activities, the Christmas decorations and expectations,
the gift-giving, the parties;
leave those for the 12 Days of Christmas
and practice Advent waiting and wondering instead.
Instead of rushing breathlessly into Christmas,
take the time to draw the Spirit deep into your lungs, your heart
and then simply rest there in the presence of God.
I guarantee the reward will be greater than anything you could imagine.

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