

December 10, 2023
2 Advent, Year B
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Time to be Found Again

8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you,[a] not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.[b]

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening[c] the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. (2 Peter 3:8-15)

On the second Sunday of Advent if you come to church services you know you will probably hear about John the Baptist, we will light a second candle of the wreath for peace and pray that our world will come to its senses and bring an end to senseless wars and conflicts. Unrest that can seem a world away from Exeter, New Hampshire.

Hear the most well-known of the blessings in the Bible – how Moses tells his brother Aaron to bless the people of Israel:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Peace in the Bible is about much more than an end to wars. It is also about joy and family, feeling safe and secure and good health. And of course, knowing that it is God who provides these things and not just our own dogged pursuit and good fortune.

As for John the Baptist, he is always our Advent guest -- fulfilling the role that Isaiah and God envisioned. He was the Advance person, sent ahead of Christ to clear the path and get people ready to hear, act and change the direction of their lives. John did not disappoint. He “appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.”

John's purpose was to point to the future: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." And people came out to the wilderness to take a hard look at their lives: their past and their hopes for a different kind of tomorrow.

Before the baby Jesus in the manger takes center stage, we need people like John to clear out the cobwebs and clutter, the unproductive racing thoughts that can drown out what we need to hear and know – that we are loved by God beyond our knowing.

Another thing that shows up on the second Sunday of Advent is a preacher giving way to the nostalgia of the season: I just give in. Even those terrible Hallmark Lifetime Channel predictable movies that are so good because they are so bad.

One of my pre-Christmas rituals may sound familiar.

I trek down to the basement to find the same worn-out boxes of ornaments, tangled ropes of lights and miniature creche figures and haul them all upstairs. The process of unpacking the boxes is akin to opening up the same time capsule year after year. Included are the ornaments collected over the years: traditional and not so tradition. Since my wife Leslie and I started dating when we both lived in New York City, we have souvenirs of those times. Our favorite is an ornament with the face of one-time New York City mayor David Dinkins -- random I know. We have bleached sand dollars that my sister found on beaches in Florida. Ornaments hand made in school by our now-adult children and one shiny blue one – my favorite our course -- that I made in first grade with glitter spelling out my name and the year: 1969.

It is a time warp every year: opening up a virtual time capsule of memories. There is nothing new in those boxes: the old, dusty, the worn and weathered are treasured more than money can buy. In our society and culture that loves the next shiny new object, what are the Advent and Christmas rituals of bringing out the worn and familiar telling us?

Doing something again and again with intention – going to church, lighting a candle, saying a prayer – we do these things so that their meaning sinks deep within us. They can become muscle memory for our hearts. Why? Because there will be moments in life when we may need to find our way through the darkness alone.

One of the most memorable books I have read in years is Anthony Doerr's All The Light We Cannot See, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2014. It has recently been turned into a television miniseries and worth the watch and a read.

The book is set in France and Germany during WWII. Chapters go back and forth telling the story of a blind French girl Marie and a German boy Werner. Marie went blind at age of six and was raised by her father in Paris. The way she learned to adapt to her blindness was through a model of the city that her father lovingly made for her. She used her fingers and hands to trace the city's streets over and over again -- to train her mind's vision so that she could navigate the streets alone if she had to. Her father made another model of the streets of the coastal town of Saint-Malo when they had to flee the Nazi occupation of Paris. Again,

Marie felt and retraced every inch and corner and street of the model of the town that later bombed and liberated by the Allies in 1944.

I connected this image of training our mind's eye to discover all light we cannot see to a life of ritual and worship. It is the work of rinse and repeat for the soul so that in our time of need and desire, we too can navigate and stumble and find our way through darkness and loneliness and other dangers to find safety and experience peace.

The buzzwords of Advent are about waiting and being alert. Today's readings are also about time.

Time. It can seem to stand still as a child and rush by when and if one is raising your own. The days and nights can seem longer when there is less activity and when our bodies slow down.

The late clergyman Henry Van Dyke wrote this:

Time is too slow for those who wait,
Too swift for those who fear,
Too long for those who grieve,
Too short for those who rejoice;
But for those who love, time is not.

This time before Christmas is where Christians can create and recreate space to hold for what is to come. In doing so we push back against prevailing winds.

Wait, God is saying. But every generation has been asked to wait: for what and for how long?

Living on a spec of an orbiting planet in a universe some believe is 13-billion-year-old, it would not be hard for us see how our understanding of time is nothing like that of God the Creator, who was at the beginning and will be at the end.

We hear this from 2 Peter. Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

The wisdom of Scripture reminds us (Ecclesiastes 3) that for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

And when you read on into the Chapter to the verses that are less familiar.

v. 14 I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this.

With the nights longer and daylight nearest its shortest day next week, maybe we can harness this time of year: to train our minds and hearts to navigate through days of trial and joy, challenge and success, and still be found by the One looking for us.

We hear these beautiful words: 2 Peter: Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace.