

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent Year B  
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Advent is a very odd time of year. Certainly, we who celebrate this season for what it truly is are out of whack with the rest of the world, which tells us that Christmas is all about Black Friday shopping and tinsel and presents and parties. Some of us want to proclaim like Charlie Brown did, from the top of his lungs and from the bottom of his heart, that there is something much more important going on that we should be paying attention to - the birth of our Savior, Jesus.

However, most of us have grown used to the disconnect we feel in our lives at this time of year. Sometimes I think our work is to not be judgmental of how others prepare for Christmas, - their traditions, or festivities, or focus on the material - for God can do marvelous things: all that we may see as the trappings of a commercialized holiday may actually be some people's walk into the holy.

Advent is a very odd time of year, partly because of the disconnect from the commercialism that attempts to envelop us, but mainly, Advent is a very odd time of the year because it insists that we do what we are probably most uncomfortable with doing: sitting in the in-between. Advent is a liminal time, between what was and what will be. Three years ago, when I preached on these texts I used the metaphor of a trapeze artist, and drew you into the drama of this person slowly climbing the tall thin ladder to reach the stage from which he would fly – supported by his steel hand grip upon the trapeze bar, and through his movement of his legs, he would swing with the greatest of ease, until it was time to let go. And he had to let go. He had to release, to enter into that pregnant and scary moment, suspended in the air with nothing to hold onto, held by a force other than his own, in a seemingly empty and lengthy space between the reality of his safety and the new reality of what will come, grasping the next bar swinging toward him.

Advent is a time between two realities, both of which can be good and life-sustaining. You are between two realities right now, whether you know it or not, and it might be helpful for you to take some time naming them, for that's part of being in the liminal time, recognizing what has been before and imagining what could be.

For school children, I often imagine the two realities revolve around attachment to particular friendships, often showing up in who they sit with in the cafeteria. For some, they know they really don't fit where they are, they want to sit elsewhere, make new friends, find people more like them, or they don't really feel wanted where they are. They can tell by the looks of the faces of the people they sit with or the slight turn of the shoulder, which speaks louder than words, that they don't really belong there. They want to move, but they don't want to be in that in-between space, where they might have to sit by themselves for a bit. Here's another part of why Advent is a very odd time for us: we often uncover our resistance to move into the

liminal space of Advent, and we often like to imagine ourselves as more flexible than we really are or more ready to move into the next new thing than we are.

For those in their 20's, or 30's or even 40's or 50's, many find themselves at the place where they look down the two roads that diverge in the yellow wood of Robert Frost's poem, and they find they want to stay there, holding both possibilities for a while, rather than walking boldly onto one, choosing either the road less traveled, or the one that's known. It can be hard to make a choice and not making one often seems more comfortable. We often have a resistance to move into the liminal space of Advent.

For those who are even older, often it seems it is our body which moves us into these liminal moments, which dictate changes in how we eat, sleep, or tend to ourselves. Rarely, yet occasionally, people move into that new reality with grace. It's hard. It's easier to relate to our body of years before, when we were stronger, more vibrant, more mentally alert, or when our calendar included events other than our doctor's appointments. We often have a resistance to move into the liminal space of Advent.

Advent is the liturgical season which acknowledges this liminal time as a part of our lives, our physical, emotional, and spiritual lives, and honors the necessity of looking at the resistances we all have against faithfully moving forward into what God has next in mind for us. We often have a resistance to move into the liminal space of Advent because it calls us to go back and tend to our old feelings, resolve some conflict which we've grown accustomed to, or to let go of a particular role we've played for a long time. However, the truth I believe we all know, is that we can't fully begin something new without letting go of something old, and there is often grief attached to that, even if it's going from glory to glory. I felt this way the evening our second son was born. Of course, I wanted him to be born, to share him with the world, to delight to meet him face-to-face, but I had also known him heart-to-heart and there was an intimacy that I knew I needed to let go of so new life apart from me could emerge. Even going from glory to glory involves some grief and letting go. We often have a resistance to move into the liminal space of Advent.

The Israelites in the story from Isaiah were having that problem. They were returning to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon, wanting everything to go back to how it was, but others had made decisions, others had reconstructed temple life in a new way, and they were grieved, for they could only look backwards at what was and is no more, rather than imagining a new way forward to be faithful to YH.

One person I'm friends with on Facebook had a similar lament this week: that she couldn't find her Christmas spirit, wasn't wanting to decorate as she had in the past when it had been so much fun doing it with her children. Her children are now grown and she'd be going to their houses for Christmas instead. They wouldn't be coming home to her. I could feel her deep despair. What she had loved was gone. I wanted to reach within her post and say, "It's okay, you're doing Advent really well. It's true, it's not comfortable, but it is necessary. Christmas will come – it will look differently, but it will come. I wanted to say to her, "take the time to figure

out what about those experiences lit up your life, and be on the lookout for it to reappear in brand new ways, for we can trust the new life is already in the making.”

That’s what faithful Advent living looks like – being on the lookout for the signs of something new and trusting that God is making it happen.

The other odd thing about Advent is that our scriptures for the 1<sup>st</sup> week of Advent, the beginning of our church year, start out with the texts of Jesus right before he’s crucified. Maybe this makes sense, maybe it’s a statement that, for Jesus’ death on the cross to mean new life for us is emerging, we have to put the end of life, Jesus’ crucifixion, up against and connected to the anticipation of new life - his birth in the manger. But it feels a bit odd, when images of the shepherds and angels and barnyard animals have begun to float around in our head as we hear the Christmas story again, and our scriptures talk to us about Jesus’ death.

But this cycle of death into life is we actually one we all know. The cycle of death into life, whether it’s in watching the leaves slowly and silently descend to the forest floor, knowing green buds will emerge in a few months, or whether it’s noticing our transition from one stage of life to another, we know this cycle. It is the one constancy in our lives.

And our faithful work is knowing that it will happen, and with grief, that God is always there, urging us into the embrace of what is next.

But we need to watch for the signs of a new beginning, new perspectives, or new ways of being. They are happening all around you, all of the time. God doesn’t wait until something has faded away and died to begin creating something new. Death and new life happen at the same time. We don’t need to fear. We can let go of our resistances to this liminal and odd time we call Advent.

This state of wakefulness, of anticipation, and vigilance for the new God is creating brings us back to the wilderness Season of Creation. If you remember our conversation on that subject, we talked about a traditional view of wilderness: one which presents inhospitality, a place of desertedness or loneliness, or a time of trial. And when we’re entering the liminal place and needing to let go, but not wanting to, we often feel this way. Think of that school child who wants to leave the bullies he’s somehow ended up sitting with at the lunch table, but can only see the future: being taunted by them, isolated by them, or tested by them as he or she begins to move away from them.

But then something can happen that moves us from that initial lonely or difficult stage as we enter into that alive state of wilderness - one of yearning, stretching for more, longing for restoration, craving wholeness. We nearly always start in that lonely or disconnected place and then enter that empty space before we know what’s next, and that’s when we need to stay awake. For the “what’s next” is already happening, we just haven’t seen it yet. We need to set the old behind, loosen the grip on that trapeze bar, and fly a bit, knowing that God is there, protecting us, urging us, and loving us. It’s always scary, this liminal time of Advent, if we really

enter into it. It seems very counter-cultural on a deep level, and not just because you haven't put up your Christmas decorations yet. But don't worry: you'll get used to that feeling and identify it as your faithful response.

The Israelites urgently wanted the God of power and might to shake the heavens, break open the mountains, descend upon themselves and Jerusalem and make everything right for them. And who doesn't call out to God at times with that same prayer? We all want God to come and heal us, and often that means to us to restore us to what we were, when life seemed easier, but that's not what YH did for the Israelites nor is it usually what God does for us. God rarely stops at restoration. I don't believe God is all that interested in going backwards, to what was. God moves us instead into new life and full life. Our Advent work is to trust that God is doing this work. When we cry out to God, as our texts today tell us, God is hearing our prayers and is actively responding by an invitation, which was brought forth in the creation of the world, made new in the birth of that baby in the manger, and has been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, for the Lord, the flow of love, is arriving in every moment. May we have the eyes to see. Amen.