

“Advent Aches and Christmas Cravings”

Advent 2A (December 8, 2019)

Scriptures: Psalm 72:1-7; Isaiah 11:1-2, 5-9; Matthew 3:1-10

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>>Circle us, Lord, during this season of light. Keep the light within, keep darkness without.
Amen.<<

There are Christmas lights in our house that stay up all year round. I don't remember when or why we hung them in our dining room, but there they are. They frame the partial wall that separates the kitchen from the dining room: up the side of one partial wall, across the ceiling, and down the other side. Those Christmas lights are on all the time. I would probably feel morally uneasy about this if we drew our electric from fossil fuels, but the electric in our house comes from the New York State green power program. So, the lights stay on 24-7. I think those lights must have been leftovers from a Christmas tree that didn't need more light. We probably had an extra strand of lights that we decided to hang on the wall instead of adding more weight to the branches on the tree, but I can't remember for sure. We may also have been inspired to hang lights on our wall by friends of ours who work for NPR and live in Washington DC. The wall separating their kitchen and dining room also has Christmas lights that are lit 24-7. And if the NPR science correspondent and an NPR producer can hang Christmas lights on their wall and keep them lit all year round, then I guess we can too.

Those lights are a year-round reminder that Christmas is the season of light. The days each December get shorter and the darkness increases until the winter solstice. And then Christmas arrives just as the days begin to grow longer and the light increases. There's an old Celtic Christian liturgy about light at Christmastime that says, “Within the deepest darkness a glowing light is lit. The darkness cannot put it out or do away with it.” That Celtic liturgy is accompanied by a Christmas prayer - the prayer I began today's sermon with: “Circle us, Lord, keep light within, keep darkness without” A reminder that we are all carriers of divine light - Christmas light - which spreads wherever we go - something we reenact each Christmas Eve during our church's candle lighting service when the light spreads from the front of the sanctuary to every person sitting in the pews. And in a matter of minutes, the entire sanctuary on Christmas Eve is aglow with candlelight - within the deepest darkness a glowing light is lit.

Christmas plays a huge role in our lives today - how packed is your December calendar this year? But it's interesting to consider that the history of Christmas in Christianity is a little murky. Believe it or not, Christmas was not part of annual early Christian festivals - some of our forebears in the faith thought celebrating the birthday of a god was too pagan. In the mid-third century, one of Christianity's greatest scholars named Origen of Alexandria listed the festivals kept by Christians. He referred to Sundays; he referred to the season of preparation (which we now call “Lent”); he referred to the Passover season (celebrated now on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter); and he referred to Pentecost - the birthday of the church. Sundays, Lent, Holy Week, and Pentecost - the only festivals or holy days in Christianity in the third century. Origen doesn't mention a festival to celebrate Christ's birth.

¹ It wasn't until a century after Origen that Christians began officially celebrating Christmas on December 25, when Pope Julius I in the mid-fourth century announced that December 25

¹ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 8.22.

was the date of Christ's birth. Legend has it that Julius picked that date as an alternative to the Roman festival of Saturnalia, celebrated by ancient Romans during the third week of December each year. Christmas gave Roman Christians a festival all their own at a time of year when they were already accustomed to being jovial. Later Christians, like St. Augustine in the year 400 CE, claimed that Christ was born on the very day of the Roman winter solstice - December 25 - when, said Augustine, "days begin to increase in light."² The connection between Christ's birth, the winter solstice, and increasing light has been part of Christian history for centuries.

Every year, though, weeks before December 25th, the signs of Christmas are already out - almost wherever look, from Wegmans to Target to the cars driving back from Christmas Tree farms with the tannenbaum strapped to the roof. But, according to the church calendar, it's not Christmas yet. We're still in a time of *decreasing* light, no matter what the box stores and television advertisements tell us. A few days before Halloween this year, I was surprised to find that one store in town had already set up its Christmas decorations *in front of* its Halloween decorations. Decorations for poor Thanksgiving were nowhere in sight. At least the radio station FM 107.7 waited until Black Friday to start running Christmas music day and night, which I'll admit that I do listen to sometimes when I drive. But, again, according to the church calendar, it's not Christmas yet. It's "Advent," an English translation of the Latin word *adventus* which means "arrival." Advent is the season of waiting and of preparation for the *arrival* of Christmas.

In an op-ed in *The New York Times* last week, Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren wrote about why she appreciates Advent, the season of waiting.³ "As darkness lengthens in late fall," she writes, "we begin to see the signs of the season - advertisements with giant red bows atop new cars, Christmas music blasting everywhere, the heightened pace of holiday hustle and bustle, lights and garlands speckling every corner of [our towns and cities]. But inside many church buildings," she continues, "this time of year looks different. There, we find [something] countercultural The [communion table] is covered in [blue or] purple, the color[s] of both royalty and repentance. There's a slowing down, a silent stillness. The music turns to minor keys and becomes contemplative, even mournful. The Scripture readings are apocalyptic and trippy, strikingly short on sweet tales of babies, little lambs, and Christmas stars. In this small space, [the] Christmas season has not yet begun. The church waits in Advent." Advent, she says, "is a way to prepare our hearts (and minds and souls) for Christmas [It] bids us . . . to pause and to look, with complete honesty, at th[e] darkness . . . to lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right, and the incompleteness we find in the meantime. We dwell in a world still racked with conflict, violence, suffering, darkness. Advent holds space for our grief. . . ." Here's how Reverend Harrison Warren concludes: "American culture insists that we run at breathless pace from sugar-laced celebration to celebration . . . - a collective consumerist mania that demands we remain optimistic, shiny, happy, and having fun, fun, fun. But life isn't a Disney Cruise. The tyranny of relentless mandatory celebration [can] leav[e] us exhausted and often, ironically, feeling emptier. . . . We need collective space, as a society, to [pause and prepare] - to look long and hard at what is cracked and fractured in our world and in our lives." This is why the church waits during Advent as the days grow shorter, so we can celebrate all the more on Christmas as the light increases.

² Here's a good summary of the history of Christmas: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/opinion/sunday/christmas-season-advent-celebration.html>

Today's scripture readings for this second Sunday in Advent - Year A on the church calendar - blend the gloom and the hope, the longing and the preparation, the darkness and the light that is Advent. The second Sunday of Advent always includes a reading from the gospels about John the Baptist, or, as we might call him in our church, "John the Congregationalist." Presbyterians might call him something else. But whatever we call him, the gospels tell us that John was the cousin of Jesus, born just three months before Jesus himself, and his role in all the gospels is to prepare the way - he's the Advent guy. The Advent guy with the strange, rugged appearance, a bit like Hagrid in Harry Potter. John ate an odd diet and preached a fiery message, calling religious hypocrites a "brood of vipers" and announcing a "wrath to come." John was, writes theologian Walter Brueggemann, a "rugged, ascetic nonconformist, whose diet consist[ed] of grasshoppers and wild honey, and who carri[ed] on his crusades outside the cities in the wilderness. It [would be] hard," says Brueggemann, "to recast John in Brooks Brothers attire. He seems more like a cartoon figure in the *New Yorker* who walks Park Avenue in a dirty robe, toting a sign that reads, 'Prepare to meet thy God!'"⁴ When we look closely at the way John is described in Matthew's gospel, what's interesting is that it's not clear whether John even knew about Jesus. John's role is to set the stage for someone else, but he expects *that someone else* to bring judgment and wrath and fire. He expects *that someone else* to condemn "those people" who seem to cause all the trouble. John targets the Pharisees and Sadducees in the story as the problem people - "those people": if only "those people" were gone or changed their views, then everything would be as it should. But when Jesus arrives - when God enfleshed appears - it surprises and confounds everyone, including Jesus' disciples. The disciples never quite get what Jesus was all about until long after Easter; religious leaders thought Jesus was a fraud; John himself was perplexed by Jesus, and wondered whether he'd missed something. Later in Matthew's gospel John sends a few of his disciples to ask whether Jesus was in fact the "one who is to come," or whether he should be looking for someone else. John wanted judgment; Jesus brought compassion. John wanted "those people" - the enemies - to get their just desserts; Jesus taught love of enemies. John wanted to see wrathful fire; Jesus blessed the merciful and the peacemakers. And the disciples of Jesus hoped for a military messiah who would lead heavenly legions and squash the occupying Roman legions; but Jesus ended his life hanging on a Roman cross. I think it's safe to say, based on how the gospels tell the story, that when Jesus arrived - when Advent became Christmas, when *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* became *Christ our God to earth descendeth*, as the old hymns put it - it wasn't quite what anyone expected. It certainly wasn't what John expected. A baby born in a barn to a teenage mother, a friend of tax collectors and sinners, a teacher and healer who spent his life embodying the greatest commandment to love one's neighbor, and then sacrificed himself at the end by stretching out his arms on a Roman cross so God could embrace the whole world of humanity. The *adventus* of Jesus was, is, and should always be confounding, perplexing, unnerving, surprising. I think God delights in surprising us, in shining unexpected light in the darkest of places. I think God delights to move in our lives in ways we never quite expect. It's both the mystery and the beauty of God: to move with such finesse that we only recognize a divine hand in hindsight as we say to ourselves, "I have no idea how that all worked out the way it did," or "I have no idea how I got through that impossible time of trial." "I can't explain it. Maybe it was Someone bigger than me at work in mysterious ways I can only barely describe with words." Maybe this is why today's reading from Isaiah uses such weird imagery to announce the arrival of God. God's arrival will be so strange, says Isaiah, that wolves will

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 17.

live with lambs, leopards will lie down beside goats, calves and lions will be friends, and little children will not be hurt by poisonous snakes. Isaiah strains to explain this arrival of God, resorting to the strangest of images to describe it.

I think this is the challenge of Advent - to look for light in the midst of darkness, even as we always keep in mind that when God arrives, it's probably not going to be what we expect. Which reminds me of a story told by former neo-Nazi, Christian Picciolini.⁵ I told part of his story back in August, but saved the rest for Advent. Picciolini spent eight years as a neo-Nazi before his life was transformed - before Advent turned to Christmas. He became a skinhead at the age of 14, one of the youngest members to ever join and then eventually lead the movement. In sharing his story, Picciolini said, "I ... committed acts of violence against people solely for the color of their skin, who they loved, or the god that they prayed to. I stockpiled weapons for what I thought was an upcoming race war. I went to six high schools; I was kicked out of four of them, one of them, twice. ... But then my life changed. ... I opened a record store that I was going to sell white-power music in One day, [out of nowhere] a young black teen came in, and he was visibly upset. And I decided to ask him what was wrong. And he told me that his mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. And suddenly, this young black teenager, who I'd never had a meaningful conversation or interaction with, I was able to connect with, because my own mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer, and I could feel his pain. On another occasion, a gay couple came in with their son, and it was undeniable to me that they loved their son in the same profound ways that I loved mine. And suddenly, I couldn't rationalize or justify the prejudice that I had in my head." Picciolini eventually took a job installing computers in schools. "I became terrified to learn," he said, "that [the company I worked for would] actually be putting me back at my old high school, the same one I got kicked out of twice, to install their computers. This was a high school where I had committed acts of violence against students, against faculty; where I had protested out in front of the school for equal rights for whites and even had a sit-in in the cafeteria to try and demand a white student union. ... [W]ithin the first couple of hours [of being back in my school], who walks right by me but Mr. Johnny Holmes, [a] tough black security guard [who] I had gotten into a fistfight with, [which] got me kicked out [of that high school and arrested.] He didn't recognize me, but I saw him, and I ... decided I was going to chase Mr. Holmes out to the parking lot [W]hen I found him, he was getting into his car, and I tapped him on the shoulder. And when he turned around and he recognized me, he took a step back because he was afraid. And I didn't know what to say. Finally, the words came out of my mouth, ... 'I'm sorry.' And he embraced me, and he forgave me. And he encouraged me to forgive myself. ... And he made me promise one thing, that I would tell my story to whoever would listen. That was 18 years ago," concludes Picciolini, "and I've been doing it ever since."

Advent is the season of waiting and looking for light. And when that light shines, it can be unexpected, surprising, disconcerting, but we'll know when we see it - we'll know deep in our souls that it comes from God. Amen.

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https://www.ted.com/talks/christian_picciolini_my_descent_into_america_s_neo_nazi_movement_and_how_i GOT OUT/transcript