

Advent in a Minor Key

Jeremiah 33:12-16; Luke 21:25-28

Whitefish UMC

November 29, 2009, First Sunday of Advent

- † Tryptophan, one of 20 standard amino acids required by the human body for normal, healthy living, takes the blame for the feelings of drowsiness and torpor that accompany this time of year. Legend has it that the combination of turkey meat, rich in tryptophan, and stuffing, loaded with carbohydrates makes you sleepy.
- † If it seems as if it were just Thanksgiving a few minutes ago and that you have awoken from a tryptophan –induced Thanksgiving nap only to find Christmas barreling down upon you—you are not alone.
- † Tryptophan and its effects is even the subject of jokes by famous humorists. Garrison Keillor writes: “For years I’ve gotten out of hosting Thanksgiving by letting my family think that I’d just become vegetarian.
- † So I went to my sister Georgina’s and the combination of tryptophan and listening to my brother-in-law talk about his medical problems put me right to sleep and when I woke up—there was the Fire Department using the Jaws of Life to extract me from a La-Z-Boy recliner.”
- † Maybe some of us wish we had been asleep in a Barco-lounger since Thanksgiving, but this tension between the darkening drowsiness of these days and the need to keep awake and stay alert is nothing new. In fact, it’s biblical!
- † The church exists to remind us that we live in the time between times, between what is dying and what is being born, between the “already”

of Christ's reign and the "not yet" of Advent, which begins today.

The biblical texts for Advent speak words of comfort, as in Jeremiah's words for today.

- † But they also speak words of warning that are also an invitation. Both Jeremiah and Jesus, separated by six centuries, speak of the destruction of the old ways of the world. They call God's people to participate in the coming newness of creation, in the fullness of God's kingdom.
- † Of course it's tempting, as darkness descends on the earth and the troubles of the world increase, to retreat to our beds and hide under the covers. Or we could just trivialize this season and focus on the Advent wreath and the candles and pretty symbols of the season as a time to retreat until the joyous Christmas festivities.
- † But Advent is an invitation to see the world differently. It's tempting to resist change—things could be a lot worse, after all. But Advent invites us not to be so enmeshed with the present that we miss the call to be part of the new arrangement of justice and righteousness for all people.
- † This time of justice and righteousness, says Walter Brueggemann, is central to biblical hope. It is a vision of new relations—between God and the world, between neighbor and neighbor, between human creatures and all creation. This new way of relating is one in which there is no threat or fear or hurt or exploitation.
- † God will overcome the power of evil, destructiveness, and death. All will "dwell secure," as Jeremiah says, with no one afraid of any other. It's a promise, and it's coming.
- † The question is, will we be bystanders or will we be a part of it?

- † I know, it's hard not feel a little intimidated, a little fearful, when hearing these passages about endings and beginnings. Change does that to us. And Advent has within it always a note of fear and foreboding.
- † Have you ever waited for a child with some anxiety, some fear, and yes foreboding? I know I have. If you've ever been pregnant, or been companion to someone who has, you know about the disturbing dreams that accompany the nine months of waiting for the birth.
- † In our extended family, even as my sister prepared to go to Ukraine to adopt our niece, those elements were there. How would she make the trip when she wasn't so strong? What would happen when the baby came home? And yet....
- † Who could have predicted, in our family or in yours, the transformation, the joy, the struggles, the amazing wonder of it all?
- † And how do we have time for all of this, with our busy lives and crazy schedules? As Stephanie Paulsell of Harvard Divinity School says, "It's hard not to view time as an oppressive force, something to work against, something to stay ahead of, something to manage.
- † But surely that is not God's intention; surely God means for time to be a sign of God's hope in us, God's confidence that we can change. With each new year, God extends to us a fresh opportunity to become the people God intends us to be, to try again to be guided by love and mercy, to crave justice, be present to others, and to live fully awake to God's presence.
- † As one year gives way to another, we are invited to give way—to seek forgiveness, or to offer it, and to turn toward the mountain of God

where weapons of war are reshaped as tools of human flourishing and violent ways are unlearned.”

- † The prophetic voices of Advent reach us in our lethargy and urge us to wake up and get moving, to travel toward greater understanding of the world inside us and outward toward a deeper engagement with the world all around us.
- † “In Advent, we are called to beat our swords into plowshares *and* to wait in patience. To walk in the light of the Lord and to rest in darkness. To resist injustice and to keep silent before mysteries we cannot fully understand. The prophetic voices of Advent remind us that the way in and the way out are the same way, that the life inside of us and life all around us are animated by the same source.”
- † Music helps us reach in and out in this season. Have you ever noticed that most of the Advent songs are set in a minor key? We’re singing some of them today. In “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” that ancient hymn from the 16th century, you can really feel the depth of darkness and winter, along with the longing for the beauty of the One who brings light and salvation from it.
- † A couple of weeks ago, I listened to an interview with Sting, the British singer and songwriter, about his new album, “If On a Winter’s Night.” Sting is one of those artists who bridge generations—I remember hearing him first when he was with the band The Police and our adolescent son was playing his music. Now close to my age, he has put out a “winter album.”
- † I confess I am usually suspicious of Christmas CD’s. They are often sappy and over-produced. But I was intrigued by what Sting said in his interview—that the cold months of the northern hemisphere have

- been granted to us by the fortunate tilt of the earth on its axis, and that they exercise a powerful influence on our collective psychology.
- † He says that like all earthly creatures we seem prewired to recognize and respond to the polar archetypes of light and dark, of heat and cold, as they are encoded in the rhythm of days and nights and the cycle of the seasons.
 - † For him, and for those of us who share this northern climate, winter is both bleak and beautiful, and we need it to replenish our inner spirits as much as we need the light, energy and warmth of summer. There is life and light at the center of the darkness that is winter.
 - † So the songs on Sting's album tap into the paradox of the winter season. Since many of the songs are Advent songs from the Christian tradition, they evoke this invitation to dwell in the deep reflection of these days while actively anticipating the coming of a new heaven and a new earth through the birth of the Savior.
 - † For some reason, I've welcomed the invitation that this music offers and have been inflicting it on those I love. Now I am doing the same for (to?) you!
 - † Lest you think that this is an intrusion from popular culture into a sacred season, I invite you to hear this verse from the biblical book The Song of Songs. It's not among the usual scriptures of Advent, but listen to the second verse from the fifth chapter.
 - † As the unnamed woman speaking lies in her bed, she is separated from her beloved. And she sings, "I slept, but my heart was awake." Even while sleeping, something inside of her is wakeful, some part of her is listening for the sound of her lover's knock at her door.

- † As Stephanie Paulsell writes, “I slept, but my heart was awake. This quiet little sentence gets at something true about us. . . . Even when we feel more scattered than present in our own lives, even when we have let our world shrink to the size of our own to-do-list, even when we are asleep, some part of us is awake and waiting.
- † No matter how tiny, how hidden, God greets and addresses us in this hidden place during Advent—that part of us that stays awake longing and listening, and reaching out for God even when the rest of us is too distracted to notice.
- † In Advent we are invited to learn to be led by our wakeful hearts, to nudge our inner and outer lives into closer alignment, to be kept awake by love.”
- † The other night, after a Finance meeting and trying to recover from a cold and get ready to cook a 26-lb turkey, I woke with a start at 3:00 a.m. I had started this sermon, so maybe I was subject to the power of suggestion—I don’t know. But I couldn’t go back to sleep.
- † So rather than resist my wakefulness, I decided to listen for God’s encouragement and judgment for me. I prayed for you, for my family, for our world. I had listened to the news before going to bed—news about the war in Afghanistan I think especially troubled me. Now there is a terrible paradox for us.
- † No wonder I was awake, but longing for sleep, too. So I put on the Sting CD (upstairs), looked for my grandfather’s cranberry sherbet recipe—it was his birthday and his faithfulness reminded me of the connection to the past), and I embraced (or tried anyway) what was coming, what is promised.

- † This invitation of Advent comes to us in our bodies and in the world. It comes in the darkness, drawing us to the Light. And it comes to us in the life of Jesus, whose story we prepare to enter once more from the beginning.
- † As we live in this time of waiting in a minor key, let us remember and anticipate Jesus, whose life was so wholly awake, whose inner and outer lives matched so completely that his one life promises new life for all.
- † And hear this beautiful Scottish hymn that is both lullaby and promise for you.
- † Play “Balulalow” ...from “If On a Winter’s Night...”

†
O my dear heart, young Jesu sweet,
Prepare thy cradle in my spirit
And I shall rock thee in my heart,
And never more from thee depart.

But I shall praise thee evermore
With songs sweet unto thy glory.
The knees of my heart shall I bow,
And sing that right Balulalow

† Amen.

Sources:

Walter Brueggemann, “Reflections for the Sundays of Advent,” *Whose Birthday is it, Anyway? Hope for the New Decade*. simpleliving.org

Stephanie Paulsell, "Kept Awake by Love," *Christian Century*, December 1, 2009.

Garrison Keillor, "Guy Noir," Saturday, November 27, 2004. "Prairie Home Companion."

Sting, "If On a Winter's Night."