

Holy Expectations: What Are We Waiting For?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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December 6, 2020

Readings

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (*lyrics to the hymn*)
9th c. Latin; composite based on John Mason Neale (1818-1866)

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and with your captive children dwell.
Give comfort to all exiles here, and to the aching heart bid cheer.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come within as Love to Dwell.

O come, you Splendor very bright, as joy that never yields to might.
O come, and turn all hearts to peace, that greed and war at last shall cease.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come within as Truth to Dwell.

O come, you Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by your presence here.
And dawn in every broken soul as vision that can see the whole.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come within as Light to Dwell.

O come, you Wisdom from on high, from depths that hide with in a sigh,
to temper knowledge with our care, to render every act a prayer.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come within as Hope to Dwell.

“What I Would Tell You”
by Regina Cary Lapoint (1913-2008)

Rest on the curve of Life, my dear ones, my darlings,
Know its great telling.
Soft is the down of the wild goose feather,
Deep is the hue of the rolling mid-ocean,
Sweet is the odor of pine on the mountainside.
Tender the eyes of the children of God.
Joy without measure is yours, little travelers:
Taste it and see it and smell it and hear it.
Music there is which speaks the life rhythm,
Painting there is which tells the mind's secret,
Writing there is which gives friendship and knowing,
Love there is which is balm to all sorrow.
It is all yours, my dears, take it and use it.
Make your lives precious and rich with its beauty.

Sermon

Our children, and now our grandchildren, have Advent calendars to help them take one day at a time as Christmas approaches. I expect most of you are familiar with them. Each cardboard calendar has a Christmas theme of one sort or another... Santa's workshop, a Christmas tree, stockings, a snow-covered village... and there are little fold-up windows for each day of December leading up to the 25th. You fold up the window and there is a picture of something else related to Christmas.

Truth be told, I'm not sure whether daily Advent calendars heighten patience or impatience. But they are fun in any case. A made-for-children version reflecting the purpose of the Christian season of Advent, during which each of the four Sundays preceding Christmas has a theme – hope, love, joy, peace – leading to the coming of the Christ-child on Christmas Day – with another candle to be lit each Sunday until all four are kindled just before Christmas.

It is so utterly natural and human to be impatient as we wait for something good to happen or something bad to end. Of course.

But we don't have to be totally driven by impatience.

And if we can find ways to slow down, whether as we wait for the good thing to come or the bad thing to end, we might discover something about ourselves and just what it is we most deeply might be waiting for – which could turn out to be not exactly what we may have thought.

The story I shared earlier, "The Christmas Magician", suggests this sort of lesson. It came to me one Christmas season when our kids were young and of course impatient for the coming of Christmas; the story also reflects my own memories of being a bit like the impatient Alexander in the story when I was a child.

The message of the story has to do with how the Christmas Magician inadvertently helps Alexander slowly learn that it wasn't just Christmas Day he was waiting for, looking forward to – but that every step of the way offered something to enjoy: getting a tree, decorating, the arrival of a grandparent, Christmas Eve. In other words... no need to rush the season and miss most of what it has to offer. Christmas is bigger and other than just one day on the calendar.

Then we heard our two readings this morning.

I like the words in the version we heard of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel". And they lead me to ask: If, as the Christian story has it, we are waiting during this season for a "savior"... well... what might that really mean? What would our "savior" look like, in what form might the savior come? Well, as the hymn has it, maybe in the form of love, truth, light, hope.

Yet I would add: not as abstract concepts.

This year, perhaps, for example:

Love in the form of a loving friend who gives us a call when we are lonely, or in our own love as we make such a call.

Truth, in the form of public figures who speak the truth during this time of national confusion.

Hope, in the form of hope offered us by the scientists who developed vaccines, and by those who have demonstrated this year unrelentingly for justice.

Light, in the form of the light cast from the hearts of those who love, those who speak the truth, those who offer hope not just with words, but with their deeds, their lives. To put it in traditional religious language, we can think of ourselves as the heart and hands of God.

Then we heard the second reading – written quite some time ago by a lifelong Universalist and then, after merger of the two traditions, Unitarian Universalist. Regina Cary Lapoint’s invitation to “rest in the curve of life” was, in similar spirit, to notice qualities of the heart not as abstractions only, but in the presence of gifts right around us – even or especially in the midst of whatever else... for us, now: pandemic, politics, planet-wide climate crisis... and so on. To notice, as she wrote, the gifts of nature’s ocean, goose feather, odor of pine, the gifts of music, poetry, art, the gifts of love of our dear ones.

All to help us “rest in the curve of life.”

I’ve had the little book of meditations from which this reading comes for decades. And the only thing I had remembered about this particular reading was that lovely phrase: “to rest in the curve of life.” So I invite you, too, to hold on to those words if they resonate for you as they have done for me for all these years.

To rest in the curve of life instead of, if only unconsciously, to be thinking that life won’t really begin or be full until... well, Christmas... or the end of the pandemic... or, depending on the arc of your particular life, after you graduate from this or that program... or after you get the next great job... or after you have a family... or after your parenting years are over... or after you retire...

Natural enough, of course, to look forward to a happy event or milestone. Anticipation can be a lovely feeling. But if it gets to the point – as it had for Alexander in the story – that it takes us away from presence to the gift of this moment... then it might be time to rest in the curve of life. For it might be right there, after all, that we re-discover peace, hope, love, joy.

No need, in other words, to wait for the Christ child, already in the manger of our hearts... ready to be welcomed when we pause just enough to notice. And if we have hopes and expectations, well, let them be for the things we know truly matter, not the quality of gifts under the tree, but qualities of the heart and spirit, gifts that will serve us and our dear ones whatever else, for good or ill, this season and this year have brought to us.

The invitation, then, remains to rest in the curve of life as best we can, here and now, whatever else is going on. Perhaps allowing a favorite piece of music or the gentle falling snow or the flight of a bird or the sun filtering through our window or the voice of a friend or neighbor to wake us up to the gift of this moment, free of expectations for the next or the next.

May it be so for you.

Blessed be.

Amen.