

Crossing the Threshold -- Advent 1C

Adventism, the attitude of expectancy, is of course far older than Christianity as a spiritual frame of reference. The Holy Scriptures contain many resonant phrases that point towards what's going to happen, for instance, "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light!" "Let us go to the house of the Lord and pray for the peace of Jerusalem, when all shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." You'd better watch out; you'd better not shout.

All kinds of greatneses will come about: the Lord's mountain will be highest of all, folks will come from all over to learn, and all will pray for peace. So let's start behaving as if we expected this to happen, despite the fact that we cannot know or predict when it will come about. If I don't know when it will be vital to be ready, I had better start getting ready now.

How different this kind of expectant life is to the one we might lead without Jesus, just keepin on keepin on; waiting for retirement and death. Even if we 'live for the moment,' 'one day at a time,' and carpe the daylight out of our diems, along with the immediacy there is a finality: "If that's all there is, my dear, let's keep on dancing." Contrast that with the sure and certain knowledge of a day to come when all will be made well, God will be revealed in God's glory, and sorrow and sighing will cease. For Mary, this knowledge is so sure and certain that she speaks of it as if it

has already happened: “He hath exalted the humble and meek and filled the hungry with good things.”

It is not so surprising that this expectation celebration of ours, this practice of having happy waiting as a frame of reference, arose in ancient times as a response to the days getting shorter and shorter. People were struck with the fear that the days would just keep getting shorter til one day the sun would fail to rise at all. “Irrational,” we say, we with our electric lights and furnaces and TV’s. We don’t know what dark is. Yet we do feel it when the nights draw in earlier and earlier. Although most clichés exist because they’re true, “It’s always darkest just before the dawn” isn’t necessarily one of them. People repeat that phrase to get help get through uncertain times, hoping it might be true. But in Advent, we are in the realm of 100% certainty. Just after the darkest night of the year – tomorrow night -- comes Christmas, the dawn of Christ among us, every time. No matter what’s going on, whatever we’re going through, howsoever we respond to the invitation, that one truth is always present: “Jesus shall reign where e’er the sun doth his successive journeys run; his kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more.” Just ask Isaac Watts.

Contrary to another cliché, we can’t really live for today if we think there might not be a tomorrow. Maybe there really is no life after death, maybe (as Rich Anderson has cruelly posited) it’s all Los Angeles, but we can only behave the way we want to behave if we have the expectation of peace coming to pass sometime, somewhere in the history of creation.

In anthropology, liminality (from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning "a threshold") is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during sacred rituals when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. During a ritual's liminal stage, participants stand at the threshold between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and the new way which the ritual exists to establish.

Advent is one such liminal stage. We are on the threshold between one life and another: a life of instinct and a life of faith. Although we say the word of God existed before all other worlds, who knew it at the time? It is only when we become aware, when hearts and minds are opened to the possibilities, that humankind can move towards cooperation with God's benevolent intention. The process is an individual one, and feels far from universal. Slowly, if we're lucky, we come to believe that God can do for us today what we cannot do for ourselves, and do for the World what seems impossible. Advent is a space of time, a space both in and out of time, a birth canal wherein we can, if we will, experience the coming into being of Christ in the flesh, in our very own flesh. When we experience it in ourselves, we become convinced that the World can also be healed and transformed; we are born anew.

Amongst the Jews, there are two mitzvahs – good things to do -- relating to the doorway of one's home and thereby of one's heart. A scroll is mounted on the doorpost of Jewish homes, containing this verse from the Book of Deuteronomy "*iShema, Israel, Adonai elohenu, Adonai ehad*" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is thy God; the Lord is One." The

scroll is inside a little holster called a Mezuzah; it serves to identify the home as a place of divine presence, as if to say “God is here and we know it, and you will be in the presence of God when you cross this threshold.” The Mezuzah is usually small and unobtrusive, but beautifully decorated. One reaches out a few fingers when passing through the doorway and kisses them once they’ve made contact with the word of God. This mitzvah is a personal, unobtrusive, habitual way of literally keeping in touch with God.

The other doorway-oriented tradition is the Menorah. Especially at Chanukah time – now just ended for this year -- the lights of a Menorah shining out from the doorway of a house (they didn’t have windows) served to light up the street, to light up the world beyond one’s house, to so shine before others that they might give glory to God themselves.

In Advent, we might do very well indeed to heighten our awareness of the doorways and thresholds, the liminal timespaces of our lives: our hearts, our minds, our homes and our purses. Perhaps a mezuzah of our own. Maybe not mounted on our doorpost, but in the form of a daily reminder of the existence and imminent presence of God. Before dashing into the day’s activities we might wait with God for a moment by saying “God show me the way, God give me the strength to do and to be what you would have me do and be.” Or when we’re done for the day, and ready to retire, we might be sure to pause for ten seconds’ silence while reorienting ourselves with thoughts of gratitude and purpose.

As for lighting up the street, yes indeed our Christmas decorations count. But remember, the Menorah has only nine lights, not ten thousand, so moderation might be a good way to go. And of course there are other ways to light up the world and spread the good news of God's love, by letting "them" see our good works, by being the change we want to see. Advent is a time of intentional, heightened observation of ourselves: our motivations and accomplishments, our failings, large or small, and also the dreams and plans we're making to change things, to change us.

We hear about, wonder about and talk about being born again as Christians. Now, keeping in mind the shopkeeper's wisecrack, "In God we trust, all others pay cash," we do well to acknowledge that declaring oneself 'born again' does not guarantee just, ethical, virtuous behavior. Nor does it entitle anybody to special rights, privileges or liberties. But through the sacrament of our baptism, through the experience of spiritually awakening to the power of love, and through the story of Jesus, we can relate to and revel in a sense of transformative newness, of rebirth.

Here in Advent, our mother is pregnant with us and nearing her due date. Shortly after the darkest night, we fully expect to be born again. Only this time we get to observe, enjoy and marvel at the miracle of our own birth. Not only that, we get to choose again, as if for the first time, the atmosphere we will breathe within our homes and the character we will exercise out in the world.