

Light the Way -- Advent 1A

Adventism, the attitude of expectancy, is older than Christianity as a spiritual frame of reference. Today's scriptures contain some of our most famously resonant phrases, all pointing towards what's going to happen: 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 greatnesses will come about: the Lord's mountain will be highest of all; people 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, I gotta start 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 demise. Even if we 'live for the moment,' 'one day at a time,' and carpe the daylights out of our diems -- literally, along with immediacy we also encounter 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.

It is not so surprising that this celebration of expectation, this practice of 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. Most clichés exist because they're true, but "It's always darkest just before the dawn" isn't necessarily one of them. People repeat the saying to get help get through uncertain times, hoping it

will be true. But in Advent, we are in the realm of 100% certainty. Just after the darkest night of the year comes Christmas, the dawn of Christ among us, every time. No matter what is going on, whatever we're going through, howsoever we respond to the invitation 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 so fully if we think there's no tomorrow. Maybe there really is no life after death, maybe it's all Los Angeles (as Rich Anderson cruelly posited), but we can't behave the way we want to behave unless we have the expectation of peace coming to pass somewhere in the history of creation.

Pope Francis continues to surprise people. Whatever else we might disagree with in terms of papal pronouncements and religious dogma, we have to pay attention to his inarguable point that anybody who really expects Christ to prevail and God to ultimately order the World will work towards justice and peace by helping the poor and hungry to live happier lives. If Christ is coming, what are we waiting for? If not us, who? If not now, when?

In anthropology, liminality (from the Latin *līmen*, meaning "a threshold") is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of 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 the liminal stage, we stand at the threshold between our previous way of seeing identity, time and community, and a new way which the ritual justifies and establishes.

Advent is a 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 our 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; we come to believe that all will be well. Advent is 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 our very own flesh. When we experience it in ourselves, we become convinced that the World can also be healed and transformed.

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. It contains these words from the Book of Deuteronomy "*Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is thy God; the Lord is One." This scroll is inside a little carved sleeve called a Mezuzah; it serves to identify the home as a place of divine presence: "God is here and we know it." 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, the lights of a Menorah shining out from the doorway of a house (they didn't used to 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, our purses. Perhaps a mezuzah of our own. Maybe not mounted on our doorpost, but in the form of a renewed practice of daily prayer and self-examination. Before dashing into the day's activities might we wait with God for a moment and touch base by saying "God show

me the way, God give me the strength?" Or when we're done for the day, and ready to retire, might we be sure during Advent to pause for a time of silent reflection to review the day and reorient ourselves with thoughts of gratitude and purpose?

As for lighting up the street, yes indeed Christmas decorations count. Of course a Menorah has only nine lights, not ten thousand, so moderation is 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: Let them see your good works. "Be the change you 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. What makes Christians different is our belief that God is not too serious to come "to life" but rather that that is exactly what God is: so serious as to come to life with and in us.

Here in Advent, our good mother is pregnant with our Spirits 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 enact out in the world.