

Lean In, Let Go, Let Love

Here we are, kicking off the season of Advent. Advent, the season of preparation, the beginning of a new Church year, the light of God entering the world. We wait expectantly—for the coming of the infant Jesus, and for the return of our resurrected Lord.

It's interesting that this kick-off is book-ended this morning by passages from Isaiah and Mark, both bringing a serious dose of darkness and judgment. Isaiah laments,

“But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.”

The Gospel speaks of a sun that will be darkened, stars falling from heaven, a moon without light.

This is, let's be honest, bleak, heavy stuff. It can be hard to reconcile this in the midst of holiday celebrations, festive decorations and Christmas shopping. But this

year, perhaps it's not so hard to reconcile. It seems there's much less tension, this year, between images of the joyful expectation of Christ's birth, and the dark warning of judgement day.

I must confess, I've struggled in past years with becoming a little grumpy during Advent. I typically find myself bemoaning the distractions of the season—the parties, the commercials for extravagant gifts, the rush and busyness—drawing us away from the true reflection Advent calls us to. This year, though, I'm seeing Advent through a different lens—one possibly more aligned with our current reality.

That's because Advent is inherently dual-natured: we wait for the celebration of the Incarnation; we wait for the final coming of Christ. What better example of Advent's contrasts than in the arrival of God incarnate: Our Savior comes not as a conquering, all-powerful King—but as a helpless babe, born to a poor, unwed teenage girl. A girl who delivered the Lord of Lords and King of Kings not in any measure of safety and security, but in

the midst of a perilous journey to Bethlehem for the Roman-mandated census. A girl who gave birth in the dark shadows of a chilly manger, far from home. Mary's Advent journey was certainly one seeped with uncertainty and discomfort.

This is the often-forgotten part of Advent. For Advent, much like Lent, is a season of fasting—of reflection, of seeking within. Maybe a strong measure of darkness actually works best for that.

Consider the story of Anthony Ray Hinton, who waited 28 years on death row to be exonerated of a crime he did not commit. Mr. Hinton, a Black man, was wrongfully convicted in 1985 in Alabama for the murders of two restaurant managers. The prosecutor had slim evidence against Mr. Hinton—no fingerprints at the scene, no witnesses. Still, an identification in a line-up led to his arrest and subsequent conviction.

Mr. Hinton waited for three decades for the truth to emerge. He could have easily become hardened,

embittered, and despondent. Instead, he left death row with a new mission in life. As an advocate for prison reform and educator for the Equal Justice Initiative, Mr. Hinton fights for others like himself. He also published a memoir, *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row*.

Mr. Hinton is remarkable for what he's done since his release, but he's perhaps more remarkable for what he did while in prison. During the darkest of moments, within his heart, he kept hope alive. Somehow, he found "life and freedom" on death row.

Of the injustice of his experience, Mr. Hinton says, "I chose to forgive. I chose to stay vigilant to any signs of anger or hate in my heart. They took thirty years of my life. If I couldn't forgive, if I couldn't feel joy, that would be like giving them the rest of my life. The rest of my life is mine."

Mr. Hinton chose not to be overcome by the darkness of his long waiting, but to find the light within it.

So what can we learn from the inherent darkness of Advent?

Some of you may know that my secular job is as a professional writer. I started writing my first novel at the age of 10, after receiving a typewriter as a Christmas gift. I am passionate about literature and language. When I look at the language of today's Gospel, I can't help but fixate on the verbs: *beware, keep alert, keep awake*—action verbs. But what action, specifically, are we meant to take? What exactly are we to be awake and alert for?

For in fact the season of Advent is often shrouded by festivities: parties, travel, entertainment. My family has traveled to New York City to see the Rockettes Christmas show. As fans of live theatre, we've enjoyed The Nutcracker and A Christmas Carol on stage. We've been to the National Harbor to see the huge ice sculpture exhibit, and we've enjoyed the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's holiday show.

This year, we'll be doing none of that. As we wait for Christmas to arrive, our focus is elsewhere. For me, it's focused on the waiting we've been doing as a nation this past year:

Waiting for justice for people like Anthony Hinton, George Floyd, and Brianna Taylor. Waiting for a vaccine. Waiting to see if the government will do another stimulus. Waiting to be able to live as we once did: to visit loved ones, to send our children back to school, to gather again in church. And for some of us, waiting to spend the first holiday without a loved one we've lost.

This is a waiting so filled with anxiety that it **can** cause us to want to dive headfirst into a slumber of indifference. We are, in short, fatigued by waiting.

But amid the preparations for the coming light of the incarnation, the Gospel calls us to a different kind of waiting. A waiting filled with both reflection and action.

In the Gospel's commands to keep alert, beware, keep awake, we might consider a three-pronged approach to this season of preparation.

First, I suggest this Advent season that we *lean in*. Lean into the darkness of the times even as we embrace glimmers of light. Lean into the tension between birth and judgment, and the opportunities to see the signs of the incarnation in our own lives. Lean into the moments of grace within the suffering, of forgiveness within our own sin.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, "The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come."

Bonhoeffer seemed to suggest that Advent's celebration lie not only in the sweet innocence of baby Jesus in the manger, but also in the darkness of our own iniquities. That in leaning into this space of imperfection

and mess, we might engage in our deepest experience of Advent.

In addition to leaning in, we might also spend some time evaluating what we can *let go*: Let go of that which does not serve us in this season of reflection. Let go of those things we cannot control but try to in vain. Let go of our anxieties, distractions, and addictions to worldly things. For in letting go of such clutter and noise, we create space to hear the still small voice of God within us.

Finally, my prayer is that in leaning in and letting go, we're able to *let love*: Let love radiate to those around us experiencing deep moments of darkness. Let love guide us in extending grace to friend and stranger alike—offering a kind word, mending a broken relationship, forgiving someone who's offended us. Let love be our focal point in our prayers for others. Let love open our eyes to see the Incarnate Christ in *every* human being. Let love help us continue to minister and share our gifts in new and creative ways.

As we're forced by circumstances to slow down this year, may we consider how a pandemic experience of Advent could actually be a more authentic preparation for the coming Christ. May we consider what rebirths await us out of the darkness, in our own faith lives and in our faith community.

When this seems difficult, when we feel fatigued, we can recall Isaiah's words: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." We can rest assured that God's hand is ever at work in our lives.

We can remember Paul's promise that God is faithful, giving grace and enriching us in every way through Christ Jesus. We can find hope that in the days approaching Christ's return, God will gather his elect, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

God is present with us in our Advent journey. Let us focus this season on allowing God to shape and mold us. Let us lean into the darkness, let go of that which does

not serve, and let love be our focal point—spreading peace to all we encounter: not in spite of the darkness, but within and through it—strengthened to the end as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus.