

Welcome The Mystery
By the Rev. Denise Schiavone

Welcome to Advent—the start of the Church year. It begins this fourth Sunday before Christmas and continues until Christmas Eve. This morning we literally move into a new liturgical year, transitioning to the lectionary readings for Year B and shifting to our beautiful blue altar linens and vestments.

The name Advent is derived from a Latin word for “coming.” The Church fathers named this season in recognition of a time when light and life are fading—the days grown longer and darker and colder, trees bare, wildlife in hibernation, the natural world slowing and slumbering around us. The season carries a duality of sorts, as we enter a period of longing and expectation, both for the coming miracle of the incarnation, and for the final coming of Christ “in power and glory.”

Early Church leaders encouraged followers to dedicate these four weeks leading up to Christmas to fast, give, and pray. Yet during the first 1,200 years of Christianity, the faithful celebrated Easter, not Christmas, as the most prominent feast. And then St. Francis of Assisi, one of the most revered figures in the early Church, offered a different perspective. Francis believed there was no need to wait for the resurrection to experience the fullness of God’s love. He argued that when God became incarnate in Jesus, he showed his love for us from the very beginning. Francis helped shape what is today one of our greatest Christian feasts: Christmas.¹

In this theological shift, the Franciscans helped early Christians understand that in God becoming flesh and taking on our physical nature,

¹ Richard Rohr, “An Advent Meditation with Richard Rohr”

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our problem of unworthiness and human sin is no longer a problem: God saved us by becoming one of us.

Catholic priest and contemplative Richard Rohr, himself a Franciscan, said this shift “basically says that it’s good to be human, it’s good to be on this earth, it’s good to be flesh, it’s good to have emotions. We don’t need to be ashamed of any of this. God loves matter and physicality.”

For this mysterious incarnate Christ, we’re to wait: fasting, praying, and reflecting. But with Thanksgiving just ended and the rush of the Christmas season upon us, this hardly sounds like the Advent experience of our contemporary world. We’ve entered the frenzy of decorating, shopping, bells and lights and music, calls to eat, drink, and be merry. When the world takes the Christ out of Christmas, the time leading up to it becomes for some a period of indulgence, and for others a stark reminder of loneliness and pain, a pressure to be cheerful when feeling far from it.

In fact, I’ve often thought it’s those who are grieving who best understand the true meaning of Advent—the bookends of anguish and relief, loss connection and emptiness, loss and discovery. This is one reason we at Christ Church dedicate a special service of remembrance, so that those suffering loss can step away from the mania of the season and into a quiet space of reflection. And whether a loved one, a job, a relationship, or some other part of us that’s slipped away, we have all experienced loss of some kind. I hope you’ll join us as we celebrate our Rosemary Service of Remembrance next Saturday.

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This morning's scripture readings give us much to consider about the dual nature of Advent. Isaiah portrays an angry God who has "hidden his face from his people and delivered them into the hand of their iniquity." This alongside the cry that "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

The Psalmist describes God as long-angry, despite the people's prayers—angry enough to feed them with the bread of tears, to make them the derision of their neighbors and scorned by their enemies. This sits beside the repeated plea: "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved."

And in Mark's Gospel, Jesus warns his disciples of a darkened sun and moon, stars falling from heaven, all things to happen after the horrible suffering described in the passage just before this one, where brother betrays brother and children put parents to death, Creation shaken by unimaginable destruction and distress.

This we hear just after Paul's promise to the Corinthians that "in every way you have been enriched in [God], in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end."

Though a bit of a textual roller coaster, these contrasts tell the beautiful story of our salvation promise, from anger to restoration, suffering to strength, darkness to light. We await the arrival of the Christ child. We contemplate with uncertainty Christ's final coming. Our Savior comes

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not as a conquering king—but a helpless newborn. Heaven and earth will pass away, as the Son of Man returns in power and glory.

Such marked contrasts can make us uncomfortable. This time of year, we prefer to keep our sights on the manger scene, to sing carols of peace on Earth, to take in the glow of holiday lights. But it's helpful to consider that when we think of Advent's call to prepare, we're not just waiting for the infant Jesus to be born. That momentous event already occurred over two thousand years ago. Rather, we prepare to welcome the Universal Christ, God incarnate being forever born in the human soul.

And that Universal Christ centers us on the dawning advent of God's salvific work in a Creation that is ever groaning, seeking, crying out for grace and reconciliation. In the darkness of violence and oppression, God our Restorer promises justice. In our brokenness and pain, our God of mercy offers healing. From within our anxieties, our God of love assures us we will one day see the fullness of His glorious kingdom. These are the promises that shine forth from our readings today, assuring us that those who trust in God need not fear when the foreboding events predicted in Mark's Gospel take place.

Spiritual writer Gayle Boss calls Advent's time of preparation a "way to strip down, to let the bared soul recall what it knows beneath its fear of the dark, to know what Jesus called 'the one thing necessary': that there is One who is the source of all life, One who comes to be with us and in

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us, even, especially, in darkness and death. One who brings a new beginning.”²

Our challenge, amid the uncertainty in what is now and what’s to come, is to figure out how to lean into the living in between—and find the hope of new beginnings.

For just as Jesus calls the first disciples to “Keep Awake,” Advent calls us here and now to keep awake—or perhaps, to awaken from the many ways we slumber. Awaken not to the baby Jesus who’s already come to us, but to the unfolding mystery of God incarnate always with us—a mystery both personal and universal. It’s an invitation that calls us to discover a new consciousness of God, to mine new depths in our relationship with God, and to explore new possibilities for healing and wholeness for ourselves and the world.

Admittedly, this can be difficult to do within the distractions of the world’s de-Christed Christmas. It’s why here at Christ Church intentionally set aside times of “retreat,” as we did during yesterday’s Advent Quiet Day. Like we will next Saturday at our Rosemary Service of Remembrance.

This Advent, my hope is that we can each slow down and find ways to carve out quiet time for preparation and reflection, even small moments of retreat throughout our days, to help us awaken to how God is working in us and what God is calling us to become. Awaken to the needs of the

² Gayle Boss, *All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings*, illus. by David G. Klein (Paraclete Press: 2016), xi-xii.

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world around us, and how we can best use our gifts to fulfill our baptismal promises to strive for justice and peace, to seek and serve Christ in all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. Awaken to new possibilities: God the potter, we the clay: formable, moldable, open to being shaped and strengthened until the end. Let us give thanks to God always for the grace that has been given to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.