

Advent Longing

Let us pray: Dear Lord, we thank you for these days of Advent which remind us whose birthday we are celebrating on Christmas. May the Spirit of the Wonderful Counselor open our minds to the scriptures and awaken our hearts to your presence in our midst. Amen.

Advent has its own imperatives: Stay Awake, Watch, Wait, Prepare, to name a few. This Season also has its own themes in the same way that it has its own colors, rituals, and songs. One significant theme is that of human 'longing'.

Advent is a time to get in touch with our deepest longings as well as our most constant dreams for the future. Some of these longings are very concrete and personal. The longing for another round of unemployment checks. Or better yet, hoping to get our old job back.

Some are yearning for healing, for themselves or for a loved one. Others are longing for a new friend or soul mate. And still others are hoping for a better, more affordable place to live.

There are many hopes which we share together-they are universal- such as the longing for peace. If ever there was a time for peace, it's right now. I've hauled out my Christmas CDs and tapes(yes, I still have some cassettes). One CD is by a singer we've enjoyed over the years by the name of Amy Grant. On her recent Christmas CD she sings her own version of "My Grown-Up Christmas List". It speaks to me of some Advent longings we have in common:

"No more lives torn apart, that wars would never start,
And time would heal all hearts.
And everyone would have a friend, and right would always win,
And love would never end, this is my grown-up Christmas list."

What's on your Grown-up Christmas List this year?

I know I share some of your hopes and longings this Advent: -the hope for safe and effective vaccinations to be broadly dispensed to enough people to thwart the coronavirus and cause it's certain demise.

2.

-the longing to worship in person in our beautiful New England congregational church buildings!

-the hope to be able to sing congregational hymns out loud; with gusto!

-the yearning to chat unmasked face to unmasked face, while holding a cup of coffee.

-the freedom to shake a neighbor's hand or give someone, outside your bubble, a hug! Shall I go on?

Often our deepest yearnings have to do with something we painfully lack. Victor Frankl, in his classic, "Man's Search for Meaning" describes his experience in a Nazi Concentration Camp during World War II. As you can imagine, the outward circumstances of camp were deplorable: they were overworked, underfed, routinely beaten, and the living conditions were sub-human.

Yet in spite of these outward circumstances, Frankl writes about how much their inner lives were intensified. They began to experience the beauty of art and nature as never before. One evening, as they were resting on the floor, exhausted, with soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked them to run out and see the wonderful sunset. Once outside they saw clouds glowing in the West. The whole sky was alive with clouds of everchanging shapes and a variety of colors from steel blue to blood red. Puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. After minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said, "How beautiful the world **could be!**"

All of these longings, all of these hopes, all of these yearnings-point to a deeper longing that is a fundamental part of the human condition: *it is our longing for God!*

It was Augustine who expressed it so well in his *Confessions*: "...our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in You!"

Christmas is the annual remembrance of Jesus' birth. It is a celebration of God's coming to be with us, to be one of us, in the human Jesus of Nazareth.

3.

During Advent however, we often focus upon those times in which God seems absent, sometimes painfully so.

In today's reading from Isaiah, we find the people of God in such a situation. It is during their Exile in Babylon. Cut-off from their homeland, with the Temple destroyed, God's people are feeling cut-off from God as well. Discouraged and despairing, they are filled with a deep longing for connection once again- connection with God once more, like it used to be.

In this situation of despair and darkness, the prophet expresses a very basic prayer, the desire of God's people for divine intervention.

His prayer is a cry for help; it is the longing for the coming of God. It expresses the people's desire for God to come down and do something about their plight.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down".

Isaiah still has a childlike trust in God's goodness and mercy; he remembers God's faithfulness in the past. In spite of their present, plight, Isaiah encourages them to wait- wait in the hope and the expectation that God will turn in grace towards God's people!

Many centuries later, we believe that prayer was answered in an awesome way on that first Christmas. For on that day, the heavens opened, and "Love came down..Love all lovely, love divine, love was born at Christmas...star and angels gave the sign" (Christina Rossetti)

And yet, in Advent, especially, it is important to remember, that even though we are living in the dawn of a new age, morning has not fully broken. The light stills shine, but the darkness still persists. Yet there is a difference.

Yes, there is light at the end of the tunnel. But, just as importantly, there is light *in the midst of* the tunnel as well; for light of Emmanuel continues to shine in the darkness and 'the darkness has not overcome it'. (John 1:5)

4.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often shared his grown-up wish for peace which, was more than the absence of conflict. It included the presence of justice as well. In one such speech he gave us a glimpse of God's kingdom come in this way:

"One day, youngsters will learn words they will not understand.

Children from India will ask: What is hunger?

Children from Alabama will ask: What is racial segregation?

Children from Hiroshima will ask: What is the atomic bomb?

Children at school will ask? What is war?

You will answer them. You will tell them. Those words are not used anymore

Like stage coaches, galleys, or slavery... words no longer meaningful.

That is why they have been removed from dictionaries."

King like Isaiah, like all the biblical prophets, inspire us to dream BIG, not just for ourselves but for the world-for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God.

Their vision of God's Dream for the world, enlivens us and moves us to work together with a tenacious hope to make this dream a reality.

Meanwhile, we stay awake to the Mystery of God in our midst by keeping track of where love is. Like the Taize' chant: "Ubi caritas et amor, ibi deus est" which means: "Where there is charity and love, there God is"! Amen.