

1 Advent – 29 November 2009 – The Rev. Madelyn L. Betz

Jeremiah 33:14-16 • Psalm 25:1-9 • I Thessalonians 3:9-13 • Luke 21:25-36 • Advent 1, Year C • November 29, 2009 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This past week has been a busy one for me and, I suspect, also for you. At some point, I realized that the week had actually become an embodiment of what Advent means for me. Thanksgiving and other events of the week encapsulated Advent exactly, particularly in terms of promises and preparation. My reality blossomed into symbols of Advent and it is that imagery that I want to share with you this morning.

I have to tell you, in case there is any question, that I love Advent. I love the tensions that the season provides as we think about the juxtaposition of light and darkness, of Jesus' first and second comings, of salvation and judgment. I love Advent's brevity; its succinctness. Advent feeds my nature that wants to get things done. We have two jobs to do during Advent and just enough time. Although I am speaking today specifically about promises and preparation, the tasks are always the same in Advent: to be and to do.

I was thinking this week about a book by John McQuiston II entitled *Always We Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living*. Mr. McQuiston is a practicing attorney who turned to the monastic Rule of St. Benedict as a way to simplify and shape his daily life. He wrote this short book, paraphrasing the monastic rule, for the benefit of other ordinary people like himself who do not live in monastic communities. He hoped that the basic principles that had helped him might help give shape to the lives of others as well.

In undertaking to shape his life according to a spiritual framework, McQuiston established a daily morning discipline of reading and prayer, and found that over time he became more intentional and thoughtful about his days. Our prayer book was shaped according to that same Benedictine framework. It contains patterns of morning, noon and evening prayer that only take a few minutes each, but that keep us engaged with God.

It was the title of McQuiston's book that I began thinking about this week. *Always We Begin Again* could easily serve as my motto for Advent. Today, the first day of Advent, is New Year's Day in our church. One image that I bring to this day is that we have spiraled our way through the year, not returning to the starting place as in a circle, but arriving at Advent again as in a spiral. Like the circular aspect of a spiral, we do come back to the same starting point—we do say the same words, we bring out the Advent wreath again and methodically light the candles one by one, we once again sing “Lo, he comes with clouds descending” and “Sleepers, Wake.”

But as a spiral functions on more than one level, we are not arriving at Advent in the same place we were last year at all. This past year has brought surprises of both joy and sorrow. Babies have been born and loved ones have passed away. We have had challenges to face and we know, without a shadow of a doubt, that there are more challenges in our future.

Over the last year, we have all grown and changed and, if we take the time to notice, we see that we are not the same as we were last year at this time. Advent is just the right season to reflect on who we were, who we are, and who we would like to be. Those four words: *Always We Begin Again* are a paradoxical message of great hope. The

failures and mistakes of yesterday and today don't have to be the fingerprint of our future. That is, I believe, the promise of God-filled transformation that we feed and nurture when we gather around the communion table.

This past week has been a week of preparation for Thanksgiving. Most of us prepared in some way, by planning, cleaning, shopping, organizing; whether we were host or guest, there were preparations to be made. Advent is a whole season of preparation. And again, there is a paradox. We are busy with the external and necessary preparations for Christmas, with all that means in twenty-first century America, and, as Christians, this is the season to prepare our hearts for the Incarnation, God coming here, to our time and place, to show us the way which was so hard to see.

I was challenged this week to think about the intentionality of heart preparation, as I so actively participated in Thanksgiving preparation. Taking the time to clean and neaten a home for guests is a challenge and joy of the season. Taking the time to sweep away the dust bunnies and cobwebs that distract and get in my heart's way is one of the challenges and joys of the season of Advent.

The connection of Thanksgiving and Advent began to come together for me this week when I read the first Rule of St. Benedict as McQuiston has paraphrased it. It is to live life and do whatever is done in a spirit of Thanksgiving. Again, this past week, we had one day whose focus was to be grateful and give thanks. St. Benedict wanted to have the essence of thankfulness be the model for how to live every day. The great Anglican priest and author George Herbert wrote this prayer: "Thou hast given me so much, give me one thing more, a grateful heart."

As I read the lectionary readings for today, I noted that they contain these same themes of promises and preparation. The people of Jeremiah's day had received promises from God and believed them because when they noticed they saw God at work in their lives. They had reason to trust because God had acted before, in the lives of their ancestors as well. Advent is a wonderful time to remember God's love and care to us and to our forebears and to look with intention for where God is at work in our lives right now.

The Psalmist tells us plainly what that intention might look like... "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you..." The psalmist begins with "I" statements because trust isn't something that happens upon us nor is it something that we are led to believe is a gift from God. *We* actually have to *put* our trust in God. God's part is reflected in the rest of the psalm verses that we read this morning. I commend them to you for re-reading as a model for petitionary prayer and for thinking about where God might be leading you.

Whereas the Psalm is a personal prayer about relationship to God, Paul's words to the Christians in Thessalonica express his prayer *for them* that they might "abound" in love. There is nothing closer to the example of Christ than love. As we prepare for the Incarnation of Christ, we are preparing for the ultimate expression of love. I've been speaking metaphorically about preparing our hearts, but also during this same month, we rightly prepare to give and receive very tangible gifts. In so doing, at its best, we engage in a very real *and* symbolic gesture of love.

Our Gospel lesson caps the imagery of preparation with five different commands to pay attention. Being alert is at least half the battle when it comes to preparedness. The parable of the trees in this reading is all about noticing. Noticing gives us the information we need in order to prepare. Being prepared gives us hope because our work in the present keeps us forward-looking toward that which is most important. In the words of Philipp Nicolai:

“Sleepers, wake! and give us light.
The Bridegroom is in sight.
Therefore we sing to greet our King;
for ever let our praises ring.”

As we begin Advent today, again and anew, in our being and in our doing, may we with intention prepare our hearts to receive and embrace the promises of God.

Amen.