

Advent 3
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

The Unpredictability of Advent

Advent is perhaps the most unpredictable season in the church year. Sure, we know it is about preparing for the coming of Jesus in all his incarnations, (per Canon Lindquist) historically, in the present, such as in the bread and wine made holy, and in the age to come.

We know the sequence of events: the baby Jesus is born, he will begin his ministry around the age of 30, cause people to feel great hope, confusion, and even anger. And eventually be persecuted, crucified, buried, resurrected, and come again at some unknown time in the future.

We know all these things going into Advent. But if that was all there was to it, we could simply stop the yearly church cycle now and call it a day. After all, there is plenty of work to be done in order to bring about the kingdom of heaven here on earth and we wouldn't have to spend time or resources on things such as seasonal prayers or music, Advent wreaths, or changing the color of our vestments as the seasons progress. We could just get on with the work at hand.

But clearly that isn't all there is to it. We can sense there is more than simply knowing all those things. A life of faith after all is about more than doing, it is also about being, being present to God and the movement of the Spirit. Thus, Advent's unpredictability is an undercurrent which can keep us from feeling not necessarily uneasy, but not quite at ease either. We know something is about to happen.

Frederick Buechner says Advent is the extraordinary moment right before an extraordinary thing is about to happen.¹ It's like we are on the verge of some great discovery while at the same time not being all that sure about what we're going to discover.

So it is important we pay attention to Advent's undercurrent, because it has the ability to not only bring us up short, startle us with revelation, some of it welcome, some of it not so welcome (even if its good for us), but then also comfort us in the most unexpected and surprising of ways.

Many of you here remember Frank Palms, a beloved member of the Cathedral who died a couple of years ago after a courageous battle with cancer. Towards the end of his life I would visit him periodically in the hospital, but not as much as I would have liked because my father was also in the end stages of his life and hospitalized, so I was distracted.

One day I finally did make it over. Frank seemed pretty groggy, probably from his pain medications, so I pulled a chair over to his bed for what I assumed would be a short conversation and some prayers.

After I sat down, I apologized for not coming sooner because I had gone to see my dad earlier. And to this day, it is hard to describe what happened next.

Frank looked up at me and all of a sudden there was this clarity in his eyes that wasn't there before. He took my hand and said "How are you?" Now I know it doesn't sound like much, but in the moment it almost felt as if time stood still. Here was Frank, so sick, and yet very focused on me and what I was going through. He was always a kind man, but his kindness shined through him with a strength that belied how ill he was.

Later as I was leaving the hospital, I was aware how much calmer I was. Things seemed brighter and clearer. I had not gone to see Frank in order to be blessed and yet, I had, and have, no doubt Jesus was, if not speaking through him, certainly in the room with us.

It was an Advent moment—completely unexpected, deeply comforting, and it changed me forever. I learned in a profound way what it meant to be present, really present, to another human being and how it is only possible when God is in the midst of us.

Advent teaches us to never get too comfortable with the ways God is revealed to us and what happens when God is revealed to us. For as many ways as we can think of, there are infinitely more that would never even occur to us.

Think about the Gospel reading we just heard this morning from Luke. Crazy John the Baptist is out in the wilderness preaching and baptizing and crowds of people are starting to show up to see what the fuss is all about. Some of them are curious; some are distrustful of him, even hostile; and some *are* truly trying to find God's will, especially in the midst of all their misery.

What they probably didn't expect however, was for him to go on the attack.

You can just see him with his wild hair, smelling of honey and locusts, looking at the people with these intense, steely eyes. “You brood of vipers . . . Bear fruits worthy of repentance . . . Even now the ax is lying at the foot of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire.”

And this was the “good news” he proclaimed to the people. It makes you wonder what the bad news was.

But of course, it was the good news.

His words bore testimony to the truth that God had not abandoned them. In fact John was preparing the way for the One sent by God who would change forever the very nature of our relationship with God.

But John also let the people know there were things they had to do to prepare as well, so his words cut them to the quick; convicted them.

And they prompted those in the crowds to ask the question all people of faith should continually ask, “What then should we do?”

What then *should* we do?

What we can do, is not despair because God will always give us the answer. The undercurrent of Advent, the Holy Spirit, cannot be confined to a certain time of the year. It never stops but flows continually through our lives seeking, searching for the presence of Jesus to be made manifest.

So what then should we do?

Don’t take God for granted. Share our abundance with others, thankfully and generously. Don’t take more than we deserve. Treat each other fairly. Or in the words of our baptismal covenant, with God’s help, “continue in the apostles teachings and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers,” “persevere in resisting evil and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord,” “proclaim by word and example the God News of God in Christ,” “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself” and “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.”

That’s what we should do.

This is the third week of Advent, and Christmas, the inbreaking of God physically into our world, is fast approaching. We must all prepare, pay attention and not let the undercurrent simply pass us by or sweep us away.

This unpredictability of Advent is a great gift because it overcomes our limitations and allows us to see God’s presence in our lives and in the

world we never would otherwise. It shows us what we can do, not necessarily what we think we can do. It can turn something as simple as asking how someone is into a life changing moment.

Advent calls all of us to stretch our boundaries and listen for God in new places and in new ways. And in response, God bids us to savor this extraordinary moment before the extraordinary happens.

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ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark, A Doubter's Dictionary*, "Advent" (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 3.