Let Us Begin – Advent 1A

Adventism, the attitude of expectancy, is older than Christianity as a spiritual frame of reference. Today's scriptures contain some of our most famously resonant phrases, full of admonitions pointing towards what's going to happen: "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light!" "Let us go to the house of the Lord and pray for the peace of Jerusalem, when all shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

All kinds of greatnesses will come about: The Lord's mountain will be highest of all, folks will come from all over to learn, and all will pray for peace. So let's start behaving as if we expected this to happen, despite the fact that we cannot know or predict when it will come about. If I don't know when, I gotta start now.

How different this kind of expectant life is to the one we might lead without Jesus, just keepin on keepin on; waiting for retirement and death. Even if we 'live for the moment,' 'one day at a time,' and carpe the daylights out of our diems, along with the immediacy there is a finality: "If that's all there is, my dear, let's keep on dancing." Contrast that with the sure and certain knowledge of a day to come when all will be made well, God will be revealed in God's glory, and sorrow and sighing will cease.

Not so surprising that this celebration of expectation, this practice of having happy waiting as a frame of reference, arose in ancient times as a response to the days getting shorter and shorter. People were struck with the fear that the days would just keep getting shorter until one day the sun would fail to rise at all. "Irrational," we say, we with our streetlamps and (slightly

overworked) furnaces and LED's. We don't know what dark is. Yet we do feel it in our bones when the nights draw in earlier and earlier. Most clichés exist because they're true, but "It's always darkest just before the dawn" isn't necessarily one of them. People repeat the saying to get help get through uncertain times, hoping it will be true. But in Advent, we are in the realm of 100% certainty. Just after the darkest night of the year comes Christmas, the dawn of Christ among us, every time.

Contrary to another cliché, we can't really live for today so fully if we think there's no tomorrow. Maybe there really is no life after death, maybe it's all Los Angeles (as some wag cruelly posited), but we can't behave the way we want to behave unless we have the expectation of peace coming to pass sometime. Somewhere in history, we know that Tarnation will give way wholly to Creation.

Anybody who really expects Christ to prevail and God to ultimately order the World will work towards justice and peace by helping the poor and hungry to live happier lives today. If Christ is coming, what are we waiting for? If not us, who? If not now, when? Just because things aren't progressing the way we think they should is no reason to stop behaving the way we should.

Bart Bartosh up in San Ardo tells the story of the old pacifist who lived near a major railroad line that served a munitions plant. Once a week a train would pass by hauling missiles and other weapons of mass destruction. Each week the pacifist would stand by the tracks praying for peace and a world free of the horrors of war. One day a reporter from the local radio station interviewed the pacifist. "You have been coming to this spot for many years and offering your prayers but nothing has changed. The train still hauls its cargo. Why do you do it?" The fellow replied, "I may not

have changed the train yet, but if I stopped coming here and offering my prayers for peace, the train will have changed me."

The word 'Liminality' **comes** from the Latin word *līmen*, "a threshold." The threshold was a lip at the edge of the threshing floor that held grain in while the winnowing was going on. To get on or off the threshing floor, one had to step across the threshold. In anthropology, liminality is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. During a ritual's liminal stage, participants stand at the threshold between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way which the ritual establishes. Think 'the rites of Spring,' or of adolescence, or Commencement.

Advent is one such liminal stage. We are on the threshold between one life and another: a life of instinct and a life of faith. Although we say the word of God existed before all other worlds, who knew it at the time? It is only when we become aware, when our hearts and minds are opened to the possibilities, that humankind can move towards cooperation with God's benevolent intention. The process is an individual one, and feels far from universal. Slowly, if we're lucky, we come to believe that God can do for us today what we cannot do for ourselves, and do for the world what seems impossible.

Advent is a space of time, a space both in and out of time, a birth canal wherein we can, if we will, experience the coming into being of Christ in the flesh, in our very own flesh. When we experience it in ourselves, we become convinced that the world can also be healed and transformed.

Amongst the Jews, there are two mitzvahs – good things to do -- relating to the doorway of one's home and thereby of one's heart. A scroll is mounted on the doorpost of Jewish homes. It contains these words from the Book of Deuteronomy "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is thy God; the Lord is One." This scroll is inside a holder called a Mezuzah; it serves to identify the home as a place of divine presence: "God is here and we know it." The Mezuzah is usually small and unobtrusive, but beautifully decorated. One reaches out a few fingers when passing through the doorway and kisses them once they've made contact with the word of God. The mitzvah is a personal, unobtrusive, habitual way of literally keeping in touch with God. The other doorway-oriented tradition is the Menorah. Especially at Chanukah time, the lights of a Menorah shining out from the doorway of a house – they didn't used to have windows – served to light up the street, to light up the world beyond one's house, to so shine before others that they might give glory to God themselves.

In Advent, we might do very well indeed to heighten our awareness of the doorways and thresholds, the liminal timespaces of our lives: our hearts, our minds, our homes, our purses. Perhaps a mezuzah of our own. Maybe not mounted on our doorpost, but in the form of a renewed practice of daily prayer. Before dashing into the day's activities might we wait with God for a moment, touch base by saying "God show me the way, God give me the strength?" Or when we're done for the day, and ready to retire, might we be sure, during Advent, to pause for ten seconds' silence while reorienting ourselves with thoughts of gratitude and purpose?

As for lighting up the street, yes indeed Christmas decorations count. But remember, the Menorah has only nine lights, not ten thousand, so moderation might be a good way to go. And of

course there are other ways to light up the world and spread the good news of God's love: Let them see your good works. "Be the change you want to see." Advent is a time of intentional, heightened observation of ourselves: our motivations and accomplishments, our failings, large or small, and also the dreams and plans we're making to change things, to change us.

We hear about, wonder about and talk about being born again as Christians. Now, keeping in mind the shopkeeper's wisecrack, "In God we trust, all others pay cash," we do well to acknowledge that declaring oneself 'born again' does not guarantee ethical and virtuous behavior. Nor does such self-naming entitle anybody to special privileges or liberties. But through the sacrament of our baptism, through the experience of spiritually awakening to the power of love, and through the story of Jesus, each of us can relate to and revel in a sense of transformative newness, of rebirth.

Here in Advent, our mother is pregnant with us and nearing her due date. Shortly after the darkest night, we fully expect to be born again. Only this time we get to observe, enjoy and marvel at the miracle of our own birth. Not only that, we get to choose again, as if for the first time, the atmosphere of expectation we will breathe within our homes and the character of grace we will exercise out in the world.