

Reflection for December 18, 2016 – “Tis the Season”

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A – Texts: John 1:1-14, combined with John 3:16-21

Hard to believe that Christmas is only a week away. I imagine that very few of us are ready. Most of us still have presents to be bought and wrapped. There's still shopping to be done, preparations to be made. It'd be nice to just sit and enjoy the holidays, but for all too few that's simply not the case. Rarely do we have the opportunity to experience a deep and spacious intentional Advent, one that we really need, one that'd probably do us a world of good. Most of us have to work in order to have money to pay for Christmas. We don't have time to waste to give much, if any, thought to what actually happened in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago and what it truly meant for the world and for us individually. Advent, for all its good intentions feels like anything **but** waiting in hopeful anticipation, going deeper into our faith, reflecting on what we believe and what we do as a result. Our own busyness and internal chaos never seem to allow us much time for that, if we're inclined to do it at all. The irony is that we're so busy getting ready for Christmas that we're unable to prepare for Christmas, and even though the Christmas season seems to be starting earlier and earlier every year, I think what's often the case that Christmas comes upon us a bit too quickly and we're abruptly brought face-to-face with our own humanity. Our limitations. Our desires. Our vulnerability. And our smallness. Our inability to fulfill our own hopes. Yet it was into precisely this humanity that Jesus was determined to come.

In the nativity story, we see just how unprepared the world was for the birth of the Messiah. Mary's news was not greeted with joy and longing. She was shunned and misunderstood by most. She was not ushered into a palace or even a home while in labor. She's lucky the people of Nazareth didn't take her out and stone her! The birth of the Christ was relegated to a stable. His cradle only a manger. As Gertrud Mueller Nelson points out: “The dark truth of Christmas is that Jesus was born in these conditions, because there was no room in the inn. “Because, the fact is, we gave and continue to give Him no room. We open our doors, but a crack and fail to recognize Him.” The sad truth, brothers and sisters, is that even though we try to prepare during Advent, the reality is that we're never really ready for Christmas. But God is always being born into our lives. In the deepest, darkest, shut-out corners of our worlds, in our stable places, God is determined to be born again and again. We continue to live in darkness and fear keeping our inns full and our minds and hearts closed. As Nelson continues: “The Lord has come despite us, despite our fears, our apathy, even our cruelty to one another.”

But, it is in the midst of this darkness, in the bleak midwinter, in the midst of our chaos, that we're invited to remember Christmas. The Christ-mass, and to celebrate this dawning of the Christ into our world in the person of infant Jesus. And, not only thousands of years ago, but again and again in the darkest times and places of our lives. For that reason it's important to remember that Christmas is more than just a day, actually twelve days – a season. Technically, it begins on Christmas Eve and runs through the Epiphany on January 6th which marks the coming of the wise men. My sense is that the Christmas season started even before that. It began for me (and for many) on the first Sunday of Advent, and that Sunday, not coincidentally, marked the beginning of our liturgical year. And I say not coincidentally because they help frame the rest of the church year for us during which we remember the rest of Jesus' life. Ordinary time as it were, that is anything but. Seasons that once again invite us more deeply into our own humanity. And, how appropriate it is that during this particular season we also celebrate the ending and beginning of a new calendar year. Remembering the year gone by. Making resolutions and naming hopes for the year to come.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, Christmas is the dawning of a new age, a new beginning, a new hope. One that began with a fragile and vulnerable infant born in a stable, born amidst poverty, death, and darkness. This child was determined to be born. This God committed to come. Even, and especially, to the darkest, crowded, miserable and unwanted places. This is where God is born, small and vulnerable, but filled with love and life to light the world.

Let us welcome Him into our hearts and our homes! Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen and amen.