



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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A Season for the Soul

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 3, 2017
The First Sunday of Advent—Based on Mark 13:24-37

What a joy to be with you. I have enjoyed visits to your parish on trips to New York, and now we are brought close to each other with Michael Kurth, Margaret McGhee and Brandon Ashcraft, sent from your community to Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, where I serve. They will graduate this spring and move on to ordination for service in God's church and world. And don't even get me started on your Rector. Over 20 years ago, green behind the ears, when we were rookies, Dean and I worked down the hall from each other, Associates at Trinity Church in Boston. Thank you for this invitation. I celebrate this new chapter in your life as a parish. Don't forget: the Scriptures tell us that where much is given, much will be expected. I look forward to seeing all that God will do in and through you in the years ahead.

I want us to think together about two things this morning. What do we want to practice this Advent for ourselves, for our souls, these four weeks before Christmas; and what do we have to share with others?

Remaining seated, let us pray: O God in the stillness of this worship may we grow more sure of You. You are often closest to us when we wonder if You have forgotten us. The toil and thought of daily life leave us little time to think of You, but though we may forget You, You never forget us. As we withdraw awhile from all without, may we find You anew within, until all thought grows reverent again, our work is hallowed, and faith reconsecrates all common things as sacraments of love. So lead us to meet You now, where we may have missed You before. Amen.

Advent is the season of light and a season for our soul. It arrives when the world in this hemisphere darkens. December light is beautiful in its bleakness, the golden afternoon sun, silhouetted by black spindly trees, radiant pink and orange sunsets shimmer between tall buildings. Roses shrivel on the vine, and the earth rests. Neighborhoods grow dark early. We go inside. Ovens warm, fires burn, candles are lit. The Advent wreath has a wonderful origin. Ending its productive season, the wheel falls from the harvest wagon at the side of the field and is taken inside, covered with pine, berries, candles, and lit, marking these four weeks of anticipation.

Mark tells his listeners that they do not know what is coming, when life will end. To this loss of control over the future he says there is something we can do: keep alert, keep awake, keep watch, wait. But why? Why all the watching and waiting in Advent? I hate waiting in lines, I hate waiting in traffic jams, I hate waiting for a phone call or a taxi. I hate waiting for someone to answer a text. I hate to wait while someone puts their shoes on, I hate to wait for a table or a rental car. Some days a long stoplight even irritates me. Ridiculous!

This time of year we are busy: more events and gatherings than most other times of year; more buying, overeating, over scheduling. Is Advent, sort of, in the way? Christmas we understand—the giving and receiving of gifts, the familiar hymns that make our hearts sing, all the gorgeous decorations and fun celebrations. If the Advent season was important for us, then why does it fall at the very time of the year when we can't

pay attention to it? Step into quiet and peace when every part of life from the financial world to homeless shelters, from term papers due to a musician's holiday schedule, wanting our attention? You might wonder if Advent is one of those things in the church that are for holier-than-me people free from all the doubts and impatience I have. Is the church out of touch with what my life is actually like?

No, no it is not, not this time. Advent is giving us something beyond our to-do lists, beyond our achievements; in beauty, in tranquility, in the lessons, and hymns, and colors, it rescues us from submitting every faction of our life to standards of function and utility and commerce. It reminds us who we are: A person with a soul, formed in our mother's womb, imbued with an unseen, immaterial spiritual part of us, connecting us to God. Our souls, our true net worth. Bank accounts can dry up, properties flattened by hurricanes. Our souls, that unique, animating principle within us, make us a person of God. From there we are given the irreducible dignity at the core of our being.

God is the still center of the storm, who gives us life and breath and lays a hand on our striving and worry, lays a hand on the holiday to-do list, knows the hurt and fear and worry we've brought here with us today, the haunting blues and melancholy that are woven into this season for so many of us.

Keeping awake in Advent is about feeding the soul, holding on to whom God made us to be, a person of dignity, not adrift in the frantic holiday season. No one, no thing, no person, no situation, no breakup or death; not betrayal or bankruptcy, not prison, not addiction: Nothing can take the gift that comes to us in Advent. But it needs to be fed. And the food that lets it thrive is our time and attention.

At the end of Thanksgiving day several years ago, I watched the movie *Home Alone* with my family. Two commercials in, assaulted by holiday advertising, we pressed the mute button each time a commercial came on. Press the mute button this Advent. Mute the static, the noise that keeps you from staying awake to who you are. Make a commitment to let the beauty, joy and peace of this season restore your soul. The anxiety and hassle and frenzy that whirl around us—and are stirred up within us—don't get to be in charge.

Commit to slipping into a city church at midday for 15 minutes in the month of December. Or make time in the morning or evening, or as you commute on the subway, to read from a meditation, a devotion, a psalm, or to write to God. Decide to come to church the four Sundays in Advent to be grateful, to ask for what you need from God and to remember who you are.

Sometimes it is uncomfortable to get quiet when we are used to being busy. But stay with it, commit to giving time to your soul, to pray, to take in God's love for you, to be anointed in the quiet, every day, with the respect and dignity that is conferred upon us in baptism. Those waters of Baptism shower us with dignity, and they ask something of us in return: to respect the dignity of every human being.

The work, Howard Thurman, writes, begins:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

The dignity we receive is the dignity we offer. Sexual misconduct, disrespect for the bodies of others, disregard for the earth, for the law, a Presidential advisor found guilty of lying to the FBI. That is what Isaiah is raging about in his own era when he says to God, “O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!” Come on boss, do something down here! Isaiah cries.

Isaiah’s God is not cozy. God is riled up over predatory behavior and illegal bargains and votes on tax cuts that give it all back to those who least need it. Isaiah’s God will not abide our immoral misconduct and neglect of each other. God is not my buddy no matter what I do or say or think when I leave church. God’s anger at the way things are in our world is dangerous rage like fire, like the people who suffered the fires of California know about, when “ fire kindles brushwood and causes water to boil.” The fierce, uncompromising nature of a highly differentiated divine being will judge how we disrespect and mistreat each other.

Pope Francis had a come-to-Jesus moment of his own this week, a model to us of how to right a wrong. His visit to Myanmar found him silent on behalf of the least dignified people in that land, the Rohingya. But arriving in Bangladesh he met with them, blessed them, touched them, and apologized, asking for their forgiveness, realizing he’d followed the request of those Catholics in power in Myanmar and not followed Jesus’ teachings. It was a courageous decision not to abide by the local church, which didn’t want to stir up trouble. Instead he joined hands with Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians, literally, asking for their hands, asking for the Rohingya people to forgive their persecution, death, and indignant treatment. “We won’t look away,” he told them. “We won’t close our hearts,” he said as he blessed them and reminded all of us, regardless of what our political leaders are doing, that if we have unseen souls that give us dignity, we confer upon others—all others—the same dignity and respect. The Pope put it this way: “The presence of God today is also called Rohingya.”

Advent reminds us that how we live outside these doors matters. I can’t receive all that God provides and allow greed, selfishness, and blindness to the needs of those around me to flourish.

We sit in the royal hues of Advent, where rose and purple and white grace the edges of God, ices crack and shine, the night sky gleams sublime under unknown stars, to keep watch, to stay awake. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke puts it like this:

If only for once it were still.
If the not quite right, and why this
Could be muted, and the neighbor’s laughter,
And the static my sense make -
If all of it didn’t keep me from coming awake-
Then in one vast thousandfold thought
I could think you up to where thinking ends.
I could possess you,
Even for the brevity of a smile,
To offer you
To all that lives,
In gladness.

Amen.

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