

Abiding in Hope and Joyful Expectation First Sunday in Advent 11-28-21

What does advent mean to you? Where has the star of divine light and wisdom led you? Where does it lead you now?

In the faith of my childhood, each night of the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas, we lit the advent candles in the wreath that graced our table. We got to take turns picking the song we sang as we ended our time of praying together. On the 1st Sunday of Advent, we drew names for who would be our “Kris Kringle” that year, the person in the family we tried to be extra kind to all during advent. More than being good for Santa, my parents hoped that we kids would see this ritual of simple kindnesses done in secret as our gift to baby Jesus.

On Christmas Eve we placed the baby Jesus hummel in the manger, sang Silent Night, and read the slips of paper where we’d written our gifts of goodness. Lest you get the wrong impression of the six Beckman kids, we didn’t always *want* to be nice to each other-- in secret or not! And there may or may not have been occasional arguments over whose turn it was to place baby Jesus next to Mary and Joseph on the mantle or whose turn it was to pick the song, (and eyeball rolls when little Genny picked The Drummer Boy-- again!)

Yet memories of this sweet and simple Advent tradition made a lasting impression on me. Enough so that when my own kids were growing up, we nurtured those same rituals in our home around our advent wreath: praying and singing-- and sometimes arguing-- and focusing on small acts of love, done without fanfare. I have warm, bright memories of advent from my own childhood, and from the days when my kids were young. But as I thought of those memories in preparation for today, I was struck by more than the warmth. I noticed afresh the *spiritual practices* embedded in those rituals.

In October when I talked about “Hope as a spiritual practice,” I shared an excerpt from Krista Tippet’s book ***Becoming Wise***, and I’ll share a snippet of that again because it also frames how I’ve come to understand the wisdom of Advent: “*Hope... references reality at every turn and reveres truth. It lives open eyed and wholehearted with the darkness that is woven [inescapably]...into the light of life and sometimes seems to*

overcome it. Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice that becomes spiritual muscle memory.”

Those family rituals are part of my spiritual muscle memory. Our practices included sacred texts and music, prayers, candles as symbols of light in the darkness, acts of loving service, and a sense of community. We knew that our family traditions were embedded in those of our larger church community, as well as our extended family.

While I couldn't have articulated it as a child, I recognized as a young mother that those evenings around the table-- of both my childhood and with my own family-- were touched by the sacred, infused with the holy, despite the occasional argument or half-hearted being nice to an annoying sibling!

Yet I felt deeply the experience of that sacred time even as a child and young teenager. Again not that I could articulate it this way at the time, but I knew that our family's focus on Advent was somehow an act of resistance to the push of a culture that started the commercial, consumerism driven Christmas celebration earlier and earlier each year.

The loud voice of the mainstream had little to do with the quiet of a simple wreath of 4 candles, and a family coming together around a table. This morning, we walk in faith into the wisdom of advent, a time of recognizing the gifts of hope, faith, peace, love and joy. Can we use this time as an act of sacred resistance and holy renewal?

The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light!

In the next couple of weeks, here in our corner of the world we face the longest, darkest days of our year. And every year I am somehow surprised by the fact that in late November/early December it's dark by 4:30 and looks like the middle of the night by 5:30! Just before we reach the turning point of the solstice, we live with the darkness increasing a few minutes each day.

Even as the light slowly returns, we'll still be deep in the midst of the cold, cold days of winter for months to come! And in these final months of 2021, it is impossible to ignore the darkness we experience as a nation, and as a world community, through the multiple

storms of covid, climate crisis, and the stratifying oppression of racism, classism, sexism, authoritarianism... (Are you feeling uplifted yet? :-D)

How I face the cold, dark days of winter reveals a great deal about how I might face the winter seasons of my life. Those bright, warm advent memories I shared with you a few minutes ago are but *one* aspect of each of those seasons in my life, not the full picture.

Their brightness is *one* piece of my spiritual muscle memory, *one* bright spark, that helps me look clear eyed into the harder to face moments, those trials and tribulations that we each collect in a lifetime. They are a building block of HOPE, a hope that “*reveres truth...lives open eyed and wholehearted with the darkness that is woven ...into the light of life.* And they are a building block of the *faith* that says, “I wait in hope, I abide in hope, *and* I am *certain* that God’s goodness is with me always and in all ways, in every circumstance of my life.”

All of creation holds God’s image... the complex ecosystems of our families of origin and choice, the dark of night, the light of day, the changing of the seasons... It's only my limited human imagination that sometimes forgets to find the God-goodness in what I label “less good.”

Joan Chittester reminds me, “Winter is a lesson about the fine art of loss and growth. Its lesson is clear; there's only one way out of struggle, and that is by going into its darkness, waiting for the light, and being open to new growth.” We know there is rest and ease of working hours in the dark of night. There is no blooming of spring without the deep underground rest of seeds and roots in the dark of winter. Transformation of new growth is nurtured in the sometimes hard to see gift of unexpected blessings within the dark times we face.

I recently received rich food for thought in two separate conversations with members of our community, each of whom is facing significant challenges. One woman shared, “*I am setting an intention to act as though I’ve said yes to all of this.*” The other talked about *befriending* her challenges instead of battling them.

In that space between the either/or of befriend or battle, surrender or resist-- winter or spring-- is the paradox of both/and... It takes courage to befriend a challenge, to say yes to it, even when we want to scream NO, not this! It also takes courage to dig deep inside

to find the strength of what we might see as our inner warrior. In that paradox of both/and, there we can find the mercy of hope, of faith, the gift of grace, a reminder of God's presence helping us make sense of the mystery-- or at least helping us rest in the mystery.

For God alone, my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God. ~Psalm 62:5

The other paradox I return to again and again, is that I know I must come to the silence-- in some way-- individually, on my own, in order to hear God's voice, the voice of divine wisdom within me. I need time in prayer and my practices that nourish me and build my spiritual muscle memory. I MUST do the work of plucking the thorns out of my inner world so that healing can happen.

And yet, I also know that sometimes I just need another voice whispering as the voice of God. Sometimes I need to be the whispering voice of God...in community, we both give and receive those gifts over and over again.

So I ask these questions again, giving a moment of space around them:

What does advent mean to you?

Where has the star of divine light and wisdom led you?

Where does it lead you now?

Befriend or battle? Surrender or resist?

Can we use this time as an act of sacred resistance and holy renewal?

And now I have a spiritual proposition to make! During these 4 weeks of advent, I invite us as individuals living in community to support each other in building our spiritual muscle memory.

What are the practices that nourish and sustain you? Do you have a rich (or fledgling) meditation or prayer practice? Do you find your way home through song, chanting, kirtan, listening to music? Do you keep a gratitude journal? Read inspiring books, poetry, articles? Do you hike? Dance? Walk?

During the week, simply pay attention to where the star of divine light and wisdom has led you. Notice whether you went on the path in willingness or in resistance. Be open to and curious about trying a new practice-- or keep up with a beloved practice-- there is no "should" here, and no right or wrong. There is simply an invitation to shine the light for each other, to share the journey more deeply with each other.

Starting today during our online Fellowship hour, and for the next few weeks, joining as you are able, we can get to know each other by sharing the practices that enrich our inner life, that sustain our ability to walk in truth, in hope, in faith. Roger and I will be working this week on the newsletter, and will have some ideas and resources to share. You can send either one of us an email with a practice you'd like us to include. If there is interest in finding a time outside of the Sunday community time for sharing this support, let me know! And I invite us to be as courageous as my teenage students were last year when we spent time doing just this together: exploring the practices that bring us inner peace, inner strength, and a sense of belonging as we walk our path in community.

And now, let me leave you with this, since poetry is one of my spiritual anchors:

Blessed are you who bear the light, by Jan Richardson

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart

a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

© Jan Richardson from Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons

May we bear light that illuminates the path for all we encounter. May we listen to the voice of Divine Wisdom. And may we walk in stubborn hope and expectant joy-filled faith.

May it be so. And so it is. Amen.