

Get Ready! - Sermon for Advent I - 28 November 2021

Yesterday afternoon I participated in an online Advent Gathering with folks from the Kootenay Cluster of the United Church of Canada, Pacific Mountain Region. There were roughly 35 people present, including the planning Committee. At one of the breakout sessions, we were invited to share in our memories of Advent.

And because I was not prepared to speak, I was chosen to speak first. Egads! Growing up, we didn't attend Church very much. Once my brother David was born my Mother stopped attending Church because he was a colicky and fussy baby so sleep was always at a premium. I continued to attend with a neighbour and her daughter who was about the same age as me. We were in the same grade at school.

I was in the Junior Choir at St. Jude's Anglican Church in London, Ontario, and I cannot remember there being a fuss about Advent -- keeping in mind these memories are almost 50 years old.

As I got older and began to be drawn back to the Church, I became interested in the tradition of hanging the greens. This tradition dates back to pre-Christian pagan times and was used to adorn indoor and outdoor areas with native greenery as a way to welcome the Winter or Hibernial Equinox, when the days began to receive more daylight.

The Norse, Celts and Romans all had traditions surrounding the hanging of the greens. They moved into the Western Church, in many traditions, as a way to begin the season of Advent. The hangings would change to purple, and in the 12th Century, salem blue was adopted as the official colour of Advent in order to differentiate it from the purple penitential colour of Lent.

In many denominations, the first Sunday of Advent incorporates the hanging of the greens as the Advent wreath is adorned, the calendar is filled, Chrismon Tree, or Jesse Tree may be erected, the Christingles lit, the crèche may be assembled and the pace of activity in and around the Church quickens.

The greens and other embellishments are generally left up until Kings Day, otherwise known as Epiphany, which is the 6th of January. This is also known as the Twelfth Night, or twelve days since the birth of Jesus. This made absolute sense when the greens used were fresh and there was fear of them drying out or rotting. It has been custom in my family that Advent wreaths, Christmas trees, and greenery are erected just before Advent 1. They stay up and unadorned until Christmas Eve, when the tree is decorated. Then on the 6th of January, everything comes down and gets put away for another year.

This year we will be using an Advent lighting setting that I wrote a few years back. It points to each of the candles of Advent: hope, peace, joy and love. Each week a candle is lit and a verse is sung to the tune Veni Veni Emmanuel, which is more commonly known as O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

In this hymn there are seven verses, each depicting a title given to the Messiah, as illustrated in the book of Isaiah. Known as the O Antiphons, they were originally written in the sixth century in Italy. Traditionally they would be sung, one a day, from the 18th to the 24th of December.

They are generally sung in the following order --
Sapientia, Adonai, Radix Jesse, Clavis David, Oriens, Rex Gentium and Emmanuel.

Interestingly, taking the first letter of each of these verses in reverse order to which they are sung shows an "acrostic" which spells Ero Cras, which translates from Latin to "Tomorrow I Will Be".

Translated into English, the Antiphons are --
Sapientia - Wisdom,
Adonai - Lord-God of Power,
Radix - Root as in Root or Rod of Jesse,
Clavis - Key as in Key of David,
Oriens - Morning Star as in Dayspring,
Rex - King as in King of all Nations, and
Emmanuel. - God With or Among Us.

The Latin metrical version of the plainsong chant was written in the Twelfth Century. In 1861, John Mason Neale translated the Latin text into English. While it has been sung to many different hymn tunes over the years, the first tune, which became known as Veni Emmanuel, is the most used and best known tune.

Have any of you ever heard of "Stir Up Sunday"? Stir-up Sunday is an informal term in Catholic and Anglican churches for the last Sunday before the season of Advent. It gets its name from the beginning of the Collect for the day in the Book of Common Prayer, which states, "STIR up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." This date is not fixed as it is five Sundays before Christmas Eve, which has since become the Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday.

I mean, you don't get much more direction from the Church about when to start your Christmas fruitcakes than that.

Today's readings are about getting ready in a different way. The reading from the prophet Jeremiah tells the faithful that there will be a connection from Judah and Israel to the house of David. And as we know, when you trace back the lineage of Jesus, it traces back to...the house of David. Both Mary, his mother and Joseph, his Earthly Father, belonged to the house of David.

Jeremiah is pleading with the faithful, that they need to be ready...they need to have everything in order, because change in a magnitude previously only imagined, will be happening soon. What Jeremiah doesn't say directly, is that this phenomenal change will be in the birth of a helpless baby in less than royal surroundings.

In today's Gospel we hear a parallel account from Jesus, in the importance of being on guard and aware of changes that are happening soon. Jesus foretells of the coming of the Son of Man, he likens the ripening of the fig tree to these events occurring sooner than expected.

The final section of the gospel is a plea to be awake and alert. Now, as we live 2,000+ years from the first time these words were spoken, we know that Jesus

is referring to himself. He's pointing back to the prophet Jeremiah in what he is saying, yet he does not reveal that the Son of Man is himself.

What must the disciples have been thinking? They would have known about the signs of the Coming of Emmanuel. They would have known about the signs to come, yet they could not possibly have known how soon these things were taking place.

Jesus is warning them to keep alert and be ready to redeem themselves. They are warned that there will be people who are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. They are warned that many false prophets will show themselves and claim, wrongly, that they are the Son of Man.

Except we know that none of these false prophets ever said they were the Son of Man, they all claimed to be the Son of God. Because it would not have been conceived that Jesus was born from God and Mary. The disciples would have known Mary, the Mother of their friend and Joseph, the carpenter father of Jesus. No mentions of Jesus' heavenly father.

And yet, we know, that just as Jesus was born in plain, less than sanitary conditions, he was also killed in a public and horrendous manner. Born in humility, died in public scorn and humiliation.

And just as a mother can never be fully prepared for the birth of her child, the world would not be fully ready for the birth of the Messiah. And just as Jesus' followers were warned of impending death and destruction, when things got difficult and downright terrifying, the majority of them fled in sheer terror.

And so, to you, my beloveds, please don't work yourself into a frenzy about things that must happen before Christmas can be celebrated. Yes, there may have been a time when you baked ten dozen cookies in one afternoon and did that for many days, but that doesn't HAVE to happen this year. And I don't just say that because our Bake Sale this year was Bakeless.

Ask yourself, before you start decorating or pulling recipes, or fretting or planning which of your family traditions give you joy and which ones do you

do simply because it's always been done. And when you find yourself on that threshold, ask yourself, does it HAVE to be done.

Please, I beg of you, don't make the children or grandchildren the excuse.

Oh, but we have to:

- a) Decorate the tree
- b) Build a gingerbread castle
- c) Spend more than we have on material gifts
- d) Cook a seven course meal for 35 people.

Last year, many of us had to adjust our expectations about Christmas because we were not permitted to travel and we were unable to gather in our beloved Church buildings. Because it wasn't safe.

Now, think back to when you were children. Which Christmas memories stay with you. Were they the expensive gifts? Were they the baking disasters? Were they the house so full you had to turn sideways to sit down?

Growing up, one year the oven stopped working with the Christmas turkey inside. It just stopped. And so, with no other choice as nothing else was open, we had a Chinese Christmas Dinner. To be honest, it was much better than my Mam's overcooked, painfully dry turkey. Sadly, that did not become tradition.

Most of my fondest Christmas memories are about going for a walk after dinner. Or calling my cousin just to say hello. Or dashing off to my room to read my newest book or making snow angels in freshly fallen snow with my little brother.

Let's go through that list again...Oh, but we have to:

- e) Decorate the tree -- why do we need the tree to be up?
- f) Build a gingerbread castle -- why, I don't even like gingerbread and who is going to eat it when it's finished, and stale and cracked, and ewww?
- g) Spend more than we have on material gifts -- why spend the next ten months paying off gifts that were opened in a matter of minutes?
- h) Cook a seven course meal for 35 people -- why host all of those people and exhaust yourself cooking, when you don't even like most of them?

Now, I may be exaggerating, but I hope you get my point. Don't do something simply because it's always been done. If it was your mother's tradition and it was wonderful while she was alive, but now she's dead, she won't really care if you do that tradition that she used to. It's quite possible she gave up one of her favourite traditions to begin the one that you dread. So do the same. Start a new and hopefully fun tradition.

Instead of decorating a gingerbread castle, bake a cake or pie instead. Or go out and buy a decadent dessert, just because you can.

Instead of spending more money than you have, give a gift to a charity, or write a letter telling that person a favourite story you have of them, or why they mean so much to you.

Instead of making yourself crazy baking and cooking and trying to figure out where everyone is going to sit -- consider a potluck gathering, or making reservations instead of a turkey and a ham and a gallon of mashed potatoes.

Instead of decorating a tree, go for a drive around the neighbourhood or community and check out the Christmas lights. Or find some fresh snow and make a snow angel. Shovel a neighbour's driveway. Offer to take a friend's dog to the dog park or for a walk. Take yourself out for a cup of fancy coffee and a seasonal delicacy, just because you can.

Now, if you LOVE decorating the tree, or baking and decorating a gingerbread castle, or finding the exactly perfect gift for everyone on your list, or cooking a multi-course dinner from family recipes, then go for it. BUT, if the thought of any or all of these makes you anxious...let this year be the year to leave that tradition behind. Maybe start a new tradition...or maybe not.

All of this to say, that baby will be born whether we are ready for him or not. Just like your child was born before the nursery was finished, or the blanket was hemmed or whatever it was, that was undone. The miracle of that baby boy's birth is going to happen. Prepare for it with expectant, delighted hearts and with a full vessel of love; not with a stressed out, exhausted heart and an empty vessel of frustration.

Jesus does not command us to work ourselves into sickness. He commands us to love. So, let's start there...with love in our heart, a song on our lips and child-like wonder in our eyes. Amen.

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry between
Christ Church Anglican and Fernie Knox United
Fernie, B.C.

Advent I
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36