

Advent 3A, 12-15-13
All Saints Episcopal Church

Every year when Advent rolls around, we are exposed to at least one sermon and a multitude of meditations, essays and articles about the fact that Advent is about waiting. That we need to slow down and get quiet and WAIT... Well, it has just dawned on me that in Godly Play class every week, everyone has to sit down outside the classroom and 'get ready for God' - we settle down, we get quiet, we calm ourselves and we wait a bit before we are ready to go into the room, ready to be with God. Sounds like Advent, doesn't it? Isn't that interesting? I wonder if the creator of Godly Play had Advent in mind when he wrote the program.

'Getting ready' is a hard thing for some of us to do on Sunday morning. Think about how hard it is to do when we are waiting all day, every day, for weeks until we are finally ready for the birth of the baby Jesus! That sense of excitement and expectation that can barely be contained - it feels as if you might actually explode if you have to wait one moment longer for Christmas to get here.

Things are different now than back in the dark ages when I was a kid. Back then there wasn't so much to distract us. This year, Christmas decorations went up in stores at the beginning of October - earlier than ever. Trees were upright in the recently-dug holes of the lot at the corner of Ann and Virginia streets before Thanksgiving! I can hear my mother groaning about it even now.

I don't think anyone uses the phrase 'patiently waiting' anymore. Waiting has changed character - now we grumble while we wait to find a parking space at the mall - we wait in line to checkout, rolling our eyes with impatience because we are usually behind someone who seems to be as slow as...well, as slow as Christmas! We wait in traffic, praying we won't be hit by the cars that weave in and out of the lanes, trying to get ahead by a few yards. Are we waiting for all those things with anticipation, with excitement, with a sense of longing and expectation? Hardly ever, it seems. Instead, we wait with impatience, with irritation, with intolerance, with anxiety. We ask others if they are "ready" for Christmas; the answers are almost always some form of "no, I have so much to do, I don't know how I'll get it all done," OR "yes, finally, but this Christmas is killing me!

Those responses aren't about being ready for the coming of the Christ child, or even for the second coming of Christ. They're about doing all the things that our culture says we have to do in order to have Christmas - parties, presents, decorations, lists - and as soon as Christmas gets here, before we have had a chance to greet the day with joy, we take down the tree and put away the decorations, ready to get ready for the next holiday event. I'm exhausted just thinking about it all.

So how can things can be different? Maybe we can change our focus - look with different eyes at the reason for the season.

We recognize that in God's world things are turned upside down from the ways of our secular world. In Advent, we hear it perhaps more clearly than at any other time. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God will change everything that we know about the ways of the world: the desert will blossom abundantly; waters will break forth in the wilderness; burning sands will become a pool; there will be no more sorrow or sighing. The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will dance, the speechless will sing with joy. Things will, indeed, be turned upside down.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus responds to John the Baptist's disciples - who want to know if Jesus is the real deal - by quoting the words of Isaiah. He asks them what they have seen happening - has Jesus been coming in with fire and power, overthrowing those who rule, or do the blind see, are lepers cleansed, are the dead raised, do the poor have the good news brought to them? Go tell John what you see and hear, he says. What they have seen and heard from Jesus is not what they expected. Things have been turned upside down.

And then there's the Magnificat, our canticle this morning -- Mary's song -- after she is told that she will bear God's son. But things are upside down here, too: Mary is not already the triumphant mother of God, but an unwed girl whose pregnancy gives her future husband and their families every reason to turn her out to fend for herself. She is poor, living in a nation that is controlled by a foreign country, and a young woman -- the least of the least. She has been told that she will give birth to a child who will change all of that. Change things not just for her, but for the world. So she sings a song about justice for all people. Things are being turned upside down.

As we live in this in-between time of waiting, let us turn the world upside down for ourselves and others, and look at it with new eyes - the eyes of expectation and excitement. When we receive the gift of Jesus - not gifts of toys or clothes or money, but the gift of Jesus -- our lives will be turned upside down. The sign that Jesus has come is that people's lives are turned upside down.

Isaiah's message, Matthew's message, Mary's message, are the same, and they all bring good news: the gift of Jesus is for the needy and not for the victors. And that is good news because there isn't a single one of us who doesn't need something. There isn't a single one of us who is not left out at some point. We are called to be Jesus for the world. We are called to bring justice to all people. This isn't just one more thing to do during Advent and Christmas. This is THE thing to do. May our souls proclaim the greatness of the Lord!

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.