

December 3, 2011

The Second Sunday in Advent

Mark 1.1-8

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Here is what I *want* to say to you: I *want* to speak visions of peace. I want to tell you about rough places being made plain and valleys and hills being made low. I want to tell you that Jesus is coming and the time of waiting is holy and blessed, that we should eschew commercial madness and rest in the peacefulness and joy that this season offers.

I want to because I believe that these things are true. I believe that this holy waiting, this looking forward, is restorative and lifts our eyes upward toward what matters. This expectation brings us out of the muck of the mundane and transports us into that season of Christmas where all is made new. I believe this.

That is what I *want* to preach about.

But it is different this year somehow. It has been a hard year. A very strange and unsettling year.

I know I'm not the only one feeling this. I know that among you there are families that are broken and hurting. I know you have lost people you love deeply. I know you have lost jobs that you loved and that fed you. I know that the news of the economy isn't good and that we're frustrated with the government. And I know that even those among us who have not directly experienced these things are weary of watching those we love suffer and being helpless to fix it.

And there is nothing at the mall that will fix this kind of pain. Buying gifts can mask the hurt for a short while. On a good day, we can laugh over the awful piped-in music and ogle the Brookstone catalogue. We can be momentarily comforted by another Starbucks holiday concoction and the brightness of children in Santa's lap. But when we are honest, as wonderful as it feels to forget the hurt, it is only a short-time buzz.

I'm not sure there's an Advent cure either.

I want to preach those Advent things because *I* want to feel good and I want you to feel good with me. But just like the momentary high from buying a good gift, a ten minute sermon about why this time of year should be peaceful and restful is a band-aid on a bullet-hole. I want the promises of Advent to be real and purposeful, not pretty and pretend.

I do not want Advent to be something to which we give lip-service or—even worse—ignore altogether for its lack of grounding in the reality of our earthly pilgrimage.

So I've just spent half of my time up here telling you what I'm *not* going to say. So what is there to say about Advent?

Here it is: Advent is ridiculous.

We spend four weeks inside the safety of the church talking about peace and love and hope when the world outside our doors—and inside our heads—is swirling out of control. At best, I think that means we have a quiet escape from that insanity, a few moments of respite before we head back into the onslaught of family pressures, painful reminders, toy commercials and tacky sweaters. And to think we can escape is kind of ridiculous.

But more often than that quiet escape, I am afraid we are sticking our collective heads in the sand as we say these things. As if, if we just say that *this is a peaceful season* often enough, it will really be the case, that the war, economy, brokenness and madness around us just won't affect us. Because we are in the Advent bubble. Ridiculous.

It is ridiculous because we say to ourselves that God is coming and now everything will be different, everything will be changed, as if on the 25th, the world really will be a different place. And we know that isn't really true. Come December 26th, there will still be war and cancer and homelessness and joblessness and hatred and ugliness.

John the Baptizer, that hairy, bug-eating weirdo, he isn't giving us Advent platitudes. He is saying the opposite, actually. "Look around!" he shouts like a madman, "Things are bad! It is a wilderness here, crooked and unpredictable. Things are changing, though. And it will be big, very big."

That doesn't mean instant gratification. John gives us no specific dates. John gives us no specific results. John just tells us that change is afoot. So ridiculous Advent may provide us yet another paradox: while it is about hope and peace, it is also very much about changing the way things are. And change is scary.

What if this year, instead of trying to force peacefulness and unsupported hope onto our overburdened shoulders, we think of Advent as a time of great honesty to ourselves.

And of great tenderness.

And of great patience.

What if instead of feeling alone in our grief while we see everyone else enjoying their eggnog and “Silver Bells”, we take this time to tend to our wounds, to say yes *in any way we can* to the things that really do bring us comfort.

Advent is not a season for platitudes and Hallmark card sentimentality. Advent that way is insulting, demoralizing and isolating. Advent *that* way denies that we are breakable and broken.

Advent is a time to take our brokenness, our pain, our discomfort and even our anger and offer it up saying, “O come, O come Emmanuel”; to get on our knees and ask for a straight path, a level plain, or maybe just for some honey to go with our locusts.

Advent, I think, is ridiculous because God is ridiculous. My online dictionary tells me that “ridiculous” means “completely unreasonable and not at all sensible or acceptable.” That just about sums it up. This is the completely unreasonable God who decided to bring a messiah into the world as a homeless infant. And furthermore, this is the not at all sensible God who brought that infant into the world through an unwed teenager. And then, this God acted totally in a totally unacceptably fashion by announcing this Messiah’s coming with a crazy person who ate bugs.

And this is the completely ridiculous God who did it all, every bit of it, out of mad, passionate love for the world God made and wanted to be that much closer to it, to touch and feel and breathe this that we experience every day. It is absurd. It is the irrationality of a perfect God.

So here is what I want to tell you, friends, especially those of you struggling this Advent for any reason: be gentle. Be kind. Ask for help. Keep putting one foot in front of the other. Keep going. That is your Advent discipline this year, assigned to you by a God who will walk with you step by ridiculous loving step.