

Reconciliation and Incarnation

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Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3: 1-12

Weather unpredictability notwithstanding, we have now pivoted fully from fall and Thanksgiving to winter, early winter, and Christmas preparations. For the church, Christmas preparations look like something called Advent.

We can be somewhat fundamentalist about Advent – no singing Christmas carols in worship, etc. My Facebook feed is filled with debates on things like that, which really shows that I need a new Facebook feed.

But rather than being legalistic about Advent, I prefer to be more human. For the church, Advent reminds us that we humans need time – time to prepare, time to expect, time to anticipate, time to wait. Faith in so many ways is about time, and seasons, and rhythm, and Advent serves as a way to give us time to get ready, for this monumental, transformative news of love come down, of a birth that serves as the fulcrum point for *all* time.

There is nothing magical about the four week period called Advent, no biblical prescription. Lent, at least, is based on Jesus' 40-day wandering in the wilderness, a different kind of season to prepare and anticipate. Advent emerged later, and meant as much in the early church a time to prepare for the *second* coming as the first. In fact the early church at times referred to Advent as a "little Lent," and it became a time to focus on themes familiar to Lent – much less Christmas-y and much more Good Friday-y.

If you grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, you might even have heard sermons in Advent on the so-called "four last things" – death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Death, judgment, heaven and hell hardly feels like a marketing strategy, and can also feel like a disconnect when radio stations are playing "Frosty the Snowman" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." Maybe so. But for the church, for this community of faith, we know something ourselves and we have something to offer to the world, whether the world hears it or not.

In that earlier tradition, each Sunday of Advent would choose one – death, judgment, heaven and hell. Not even one of those for one Sunday, but an acknowledgement that an impulse within that long-ago tradition was spot-on. It is the heart of why we prepare and anticipate in the first place, the reason for our waiting and hope.

We have debated and discussed and even fought for centuries over what it means, but the church has agreed from the very outset about Christ's humanity, that the tiny, little baby whose birth we await was in fact that – a tiny, little baby, a real flesh and blood human. Not a pretend human. Not divinity dressed up like one of us. But one of us. Who will do all the things babies do, and do all the things humans do – feel, love, laugh, cry, get angry, and, eventually, die.

That's the connection between Advent and Lent, and while it may seem odd, and perhaps even off-putting, to think about death now in this season of festivity, it is not, I would say, odd. And it might even be comforting. And hopeful. Death as a part of life, death as a part of the human experience, reminds us that God is not detached and distant, some overseer somewhere in some home office, or some cosmic watchmaker who assembles the parts and winds them up and then steps back and watches time unfold.

Emmanuel means "God with us." With us. And incarnation means God in the flesh, human flesh. Flesh-and-blood. What is remarkable, and beyond remarkable, is that of all the ways that God could have chosen to interact with the world God created, and even to redeem the world God created, God chose this way. After all was said and done, God chose to enter the world in all its messiness and chaos in the messy and chaotic flesh-and-blood human form. Incarnation. God with us.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "In Christ, God was in the world, reconciling the world to himself." In Christ. God was. In the world. That's how God repairs our brokenness, heals our division, in Christ. God with us. Incarnation.

It is unconventional, yes. But it shouldn't be surprising. The prophet Isaiah gives us a preview, and while we debate how we have foisted the Jesus story on these words, we cannot debate God's intentions – that a real, live human being will come who will change everything. God's spirit will be with him in order that he is in the world, with us, differently. Just. Righteous. And we will live differently because of him. Peaceably. Reconciled. "The wolf shall live with the lamb." Because of this incarnate one who will carry, who will en-flesh and embody, God's vision, God's hope for the world. So we shouldn't be surprised, because God tells us this is how God will be.

John the Baptist punctuates all of that. The kingdom of God is near. Repent, People, get ready. John's words are sobering; again, calling his audience a "brood of vipers" is hardly way to win friends. But John understands what we all know, that life can not only be broken and messy, but it can be downright messed-up. That the world can be messed-up. Some beyond our control, but some within it, and of our own doing.

John delivers the message more pointedly, less poetically, yet the message is the same. God is coming – in the flesh – to make things right, to *reconcile*.

Preparation and anticipation will look like many things. It will look like getting our hearts ready. But it will also look like getting our house in order.

Whether comforting prophetic words or bracing ones, are all predicated on God showing up, not like us, but as us.

20th century theologian Karl Barth calls this “the humanity of God.” From the beginning, Barth wrote, God is “bound” to us. Bound to us. God does not exist apart from us, but becomes us. That has far-reaching consequences. It means we anticipate what is to come, and it means we re-direct now what needs re-directing. It means we live our lives differently, aware both of our own mortality, yet at a deeper level aware that our mortality commences differently, and unfolds with a reconciled destination. Incarnation redefines the journey itself.

What does that mean?

- That means as we face cancer, or memory loss, or journey with a loved one who does, God is with us.
- That means that God is with us, suffering when we suffer – emotionally or physically or spiritually.
- That means that God experiences our depression and addiction and estrangement.
- That means that as our world, our broken and fearful world, seems ever more broken and ever more fearful, God is not out there somewhere, but here, with us, at a Native American water rights protest, on a campus with an active shooter, even in the hustle and bustle of this holiday season, that produces joy, yes, but so many other things.

The destination of Advent is Christmas, life, just as the destination of Lent is Easter, new life. But the journey in between is incarnation, with joy and gladness to be sure, and also with human challenge and suffering, even death.

Our comfort comes in the form of fellow travelers, all of us, the church, and our comfort is punctuated by the good news that in the midst of that community is God.

Several years ago there was a popular song by Joan Osborne. “One of Us.” People were outraged by it. “What if God was one of us. Just a slob like one of us. Just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home.” People were outraged. I was not. I knew. God *was* one of us. Just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home.

We sang it in a different way last night, to conclude a quite spectacular concert by the American Boychoir. After the boys had sung their hearts out, we were invited to sing “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” And there it was – “word of the Father, *now in flesh appearing.*” Now in flesh appearing.

Incarnation. More than a theological doctrine, but a prophetic promise, a comfort and provocation, the flesh-and-blood gift for which the world awaits and for which we, in hope, prepare. Amen.