

December 10, 2011

Advent Quiet Day

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Holy Trinity Parish, Decatur, Georgia

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In January, 1964, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote about the non-violent uprising the previous summer of African Americans on behalf of freedom and equality. 1963 was the 100th anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The title of King's book was *Why We Can't Wait*:¹

Tomorrow is the third Sunday in Advent, the season of waiting—of preparation for the coming of our Lord. The contemplative tradition of Christian spirituality has emphasized the quiet, patient, expectant character of the season of Advent as a time of waiting. Today some Episcopal churches, like Holy Trinity, celebrate the Third Sunday of Advent as “Rose Sunday,” lighting a rose colored candle, as a reminder of Mary, that brave young woman, who said “Yes” to God's call, and then courageously waited for the full flowering of *her* hope for justice with Jesus' birth.

Maybe at the beginning of the 21st century in the western world we are particularly drawn toward a contemplative understanding of Advent, because it seems that the pace and the materialism of our lives is hurrying and worrying us all the time. Advent is a space to slow down, to hold off the commercialism of the secular rush to Christmas—which by now seems to begin the day after Hallowe'en!

But there is another dimension of Advent as well, and that is the prophetic dimension. If the dimension of expectant and patient waiting is represented by Mary, then we might say that this other prophetic dimension is represented by the figure of John the Baptist, whom we encounter again today in our Gospel text. John's brand of waiting for Christ's coming was one of stirring people up, calling them to repentance not just in mood but in complete reformation of their lives. John pointed to the spiritual poverty of the religious practices and institutions of his day, and said, “Look, wake up, people! God is about to deliver us from oppression! God is about to bring us a messiah, a savior! Repent, for God's judgment is at hand!”

Sometimes circumstances call us to wait patiently for someone or something to come right to our door. But other times we are called to rush out and greet that someone or something, to meet them and smooth their path. Think of the father of the Prodigal Son. He did not sit in his living room, quietly waiting. He ran out and met the return of the Son with gifts and embracing.

How do we know what kind of waiting is called for from us, in our various life paths now? Perhaps when what is waited and hoped for is an organic process, a

process of healing or birthing, then what is called for is patience, cooperation with whatever is needed to create the best environment for the new healing or birth to occur, and an effort to cultivate patience and serenity of mind. But when what is waited and hoped for is the righting of a wrong, the liberation of one or more people from an oppressive situation, then patience and passivity is no longer what is required of us.

John did not patiently wait for the Messiah. He rushed out to meet him, and threw aside all convention about etiquette and following “proper channels.” He extravagantly welcomed people into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized and symbolically cleansed from the old ways of living under Roman occupation, and to be renewed in once again living authentically and freely as God intended. He spoke the truth, even though it cost him his life.

Some believe, with care and sincerity, in a strategy of quietly working through existing channels, hoping that those in power will see the reason behind the movement for change, and allow for reform. But some others believe that some changes will never happen unless the disempowered stand up and claim their power, with or without permission. I believe that in many situations, *both* efforts are needed simultaneously, and some of us may be more temperamentally suited toward one avenue of reform or the other. I believe we need each other—both the quiet behind-the-scenes workers and conciliators, and the more visible, vocal activists—to help smooth the path, to “make straight a highway for our God” to come again in new and surprising ways.

Thinking about the way things are in our world today—in our local community, in our Episcopal and Anglican Communion, in our nation, and in our war-savaged world, we need both quiet listeners and thinkers, and vocal critics and activists, perhaps now as much as any time in history. There may be changes for which we are called to take the long view and exercise restraint and patience—in our relationships, and in our wider political lives. Then again, there may be changes for which we need to say together with Martin Luther King, that it is time to take an active stance, the equivalent of non-violent action in whatever situation we find ourselves, whether it is personal or public—to say “why we can’t wait.”

In his letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963, King wrote:

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro [his word at that time] with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’²

This morning's reflections have given us an opportunity to spend some time meditation on what kind of waiting is God calling each of *us* to do in our life now. Just as the rhythm of this day has taken us from contemplation about our inner life, to contemplation about our relationships, and finally our calling to join in partnership with God's desire for the world, we may ask: what part of the spiritual path are we on right now? And what is the kind of hopeful waiting that best characterizes this season of Advent for you right now?

Are you at a time in your life when the image of quiet, hopeful unfolding fits best? Or are there things that are wrong that must be set right, urgently, and which call you to a more proactive stance of helping to bring about that which is hoped for? Some changes are brought about by time and patient endurance, and others, by actively trying to make a difference. As Christians, we are called to *both* forms of Advent waiting at different times in our lives. And this requires discernment. As in the words of one of the most familiar of all prayers, attributed to the great ethicist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

My prayer for you today is that the time you have taken to reflect in silence with one another has given you some good food for thought, and some new things to pray about. I pray that you will open the door to God's birthing of new healing, new creativity in your life. I pray that you will know the extravagant love that God has for you, uniquely and preciously you. I pray that you will find the recognition you need, and discern who most needs to be recognized by you. I pray that you will discern *your* calling by God to be a light to the world, to discover that place "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

As we come together to this table, let us "taste and see that the Lord is good," and let us be filled with the joy of Holy Waiting that this Advent season has given to us yet again this year. *Amen.*

NOTES

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 1963).

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *ibid.*, pp. 80-81