

Advent 2 B
St. Stephen's, Orinda

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Hearing Voices

Last Sunday, Bishop Marc reminded us why we have seasons in our church liturgical year. Our faith is full of big things, incarnation, resurrection, ascension, you know, the big holy days and seasons of our faith, so we set aside a time to reflect upon each of them in an intentional way. Advent is one of my favorite seasons, so I think I might have a little more to say about this season of Advent. This season of hope and preparation, of paying attention and expectant waiting, can have great meaning for us, if we let it.

Advent can provide an opportunity for spiritual growth, if we let it. Many of us are reading the gospel according to Mark right now. Just last week I began to subscribe to Brother, give us a word, from the Cowley Fathers Benedictine community in Cambridge, Mass. They e-mail a word each day, a word to think about, to pray about, to meditate on. The first day the word was "now," a pretty innocuous word, except to me, who has been putting off losing weight and exercising for months, now. The next day the word was "forgiveness," and who does not need to be more forgiving? Then the word was "prepare" a major theme of Advent. And today the word is "listen!"

Listen, but to which voices? There are many voices competing for our attention. The voices of the culture tell us that we only have so many days left to make sure that we have bought every trinket and trophy our society has to offer. These cultural voices do not have our best interests at heart. This "season of giving" keeps getting longer. Some stores opened at midnight on Thanksgiving night; long lines of people waited for the bargains inside. One shopper in southern California pepper sprayed her fellow shoppers so she could get the bargain something she wanted. Crazy, isn't it?

But the Church, in the midst of the hurry and the noise of the season, says, well, let's just wait a minute here, OK? Just what is this upcoming celebration all about anyway? It is about nothing less than the birth of hope, the birth of love, the birth of a new era in the relationship between our God and us. And that is worth slowing down for, worth listening to, and worth preparing for.

The cultural voices may be loud, but there are other voices asking to be heard this Advent. They do not shout at us; they do not clamor for our attention. These Advent voices do have our best interests at heart. If we listen carefully, we can hear those Advent voices; there are four of them in our readings today—Isaiah, the Psalmist, Peter, and John the Baptist.

The voice of Isaiah offers hope and comfort to a people in exile. In this passage we have the familiar words, “comfort, o comfort, my people” and images of the power of God to restore and care for God’s people. Some of the Isaiah’s words inspired Handel to compose his masterpiece Messiah, so wonderfully performed here Friday night. Earlier, the prophet has denounced Israel for its sin and meaningless worship and called her to return to a life of mercy and justice. Now there is the hope of God’s presence, power, and love for those God’s has created. This Advent voice calls us to trust in God and in God’s love for us – to wait upon God.

The next Advent voice is the Psalmist. He holds out a vision that God is near, and God speaks peace to God’s faithful people. He writes as if the comfort that Isaiah foresaw was an accomplished fact. This Advent voice calls us to notice and to celebrate what God has already done for us.

The next Advent voice is St. Peter. His Advent voice would speak to a people who are concerned that Jesus has not yet returned. This was a big deal in the first century church – not such a big deal for us. Peter simply reminds them, and us, that no one knows the end of history, or even the end of our own human life, so being prepared is the best way to live.

Be at peace with yourself, be people of peace with each other, live virtuous lives “without spot or blemish,” and be grateful that God is patient with us faltering people.

Peter also wants Christians to not to be so concerned with time. Instead, Peter would caution us that we must have a sense of timing—knowing the potential value of each moment and so live not only being good, but doing good. This Advent voice calls us to good lives and good works.

The last Advent voice today is that of John the Baptist. This is the beginning of Mark's gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the shortest, most direct, most straightforward of the four gospels. This is the gospel for the church year that began last Sunday, and the gospel that many of us are reading during Advent. Beginning with a simple declaration that Jesus is the Son of God, right from the get go Mark gives us a reminder that Advent isn't just about the approach of Christmas. There is no mention of Christ's birth today. The voice we hear is not a baby's wail but the sound of the potentially terrifying adult John the Baptist who is preparing the way for the Messiah. I imagine him as wild-eyed, dressed strangely in camel hair, which would not be in the form of the tasteful blazer that we are used to. Locust parts and wild honey stuck in his beard, John points away from himself to Jesus who is coming, and he says, in effect, "You think this is something? Well, you ain't seen nothing yet!"

We modern disciples of Jesus may have to strain to try to hear these Advent voices today. Despite our busy lives we can hear them if we listen carefully. They speak to us of a vision of what has been called the peaceable kingdom, a time and a place where God's will is actually done, by us as it is in heaven. This vision has and can continue to offer hope and guidance for people in difficult times. If we listen to these Advent voices, their vision might help us as we face our challenging times, economically and politically – as we face fear at home, and fear abroad.

So what does this vision look like? Listen to those voices again. There is the vision in the voice of Isaiah of a people loved wholly by God and living as if we actually believe it. There is the vision held out by the psalmist of a people who notice and celebrate the good things God has already done for us.

There is the vision held out by Peter of a peaceful people walking in the light of God's never-ending love for us. There is the vision held out by John the Baptist of a people expecting great things from Jesus, and because of Jesus, expecting great things from each other and from ourselves.

Since God trust each of us with this our moment in time, God entrusts us with God's vision for humanity. And we make the best of our time in the midst of our own everyday and perhaps to us ordinary lives by simply loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves. That is Christianity 101!

You see, if we listen very, very carefully, we may hear more voices today, voices that call us to make the best of this our time. They are the voices of people in the world with not enough food. They are the voices of people in the world with no place to live. They are the voices of people in the world with not enough love. They are voices of people in the world who are lonely or afraid. It is the voice of creation itself, often exploited and neglected.

These are the voices of those served by Gifts for Life, which provides self-sufficiency to those in need around the world by gifting them with animals, mosquito nets, and all manner of things that make life better for many struggling people on this planet earth, our fragile home.

These are voices of the families served by our Angel Project, which provides a brighter Christmas to some in our immediate community, and hope for the days to come.

These are voices of those served by our Food Banks, which provide food for those who are hungry, and which benefited from our community Messiah Sing Friday night.

These are voices of those served by Shelter, Inc., and Winter Nights Shelter, that we will be serving this winter and spring, providing housing for those who lack shelter, and reminding them that others do care.

These are voices of those served by our Caring for Creation efforts to participate in the healing of the earth by living more responsibly, and given shape and focus by our stepping out in faith through our solar installation at St. Stephen's just completed last week.

These are voices calling this morning for our participation in the transformation of the lives of others and of our planet, and they are as near as the entry way to the church or the parish hall beneath us. They call us to give the gift of ourselves.

I recently received an e-mail with this quote from Eric Hoffer: "You can never have enough of the things you don't need to make you happy." This is, as all of our advertising media will tell us, the season of giving. The church, through this season of Advent, reminds us that God first gave to us. God gave us life. God gave us freedom to choose how to live. God gave us Jesus when left on our own we failed. Advent is a time to prepare for Christmas, a time for us to think about our giving as a response to the gifts that God gives us. The gifts we give are a reminder and a reflection of those great gifts. There is nothing wrong with giving gifts in that spirit. The greatest gift we can give each other mirrors the gift of God's self in Jesus. The best gift we can give is the gift of our selves - the gift of our time, the gift of patience, the gift of listening. Simple gifts, yes, but oh so valuable in our relationships with our children and parents, with our families and friends.

You know, if the only gifts we give are the trinkets or trophies of our contemporary culture, maybe we're missing the point. Or maybe hearing the wrong voices! Listen, to what the Lord God is saying and it will bring you peace.