"Time is money? No time is spirituality... Your time is what you give to God. God's time is what Advent is all about."

Rob Lord
Sunday the First Week of Advent

Hope

Each Advent we repeat the refrain “Come, Lord, Come” which may mistakenly lead us to imagine that God is somewhere else and needs to come down from there to be with us.

But the Advent hope is not that God will come to somewhere God is presently not because God is deeply present in the world always and ever.

No, the Advent hope is that we will open our eyes and see where God is already present; that we will open our minds and be transformed into agents of God’s will; that we will open our hearts and find room in them for all of God’s beloved creation.

Each Advent offers the possibility of a second coming. Not in the traditional sense of a world-ending conclusive final appearance of the divine, but in the potential of Christ being born again in us. Meister Eckhart put it this way: “We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.” To be a mother of God — a calling for men as much as for women — is to allow ourselves to be open to the life-changing grace of God finding a home in us. It is to put ourselves at the service of God in a life which becomes fruitful and procreative.

Each Advent we are called to be open to God’s grace that we may become the hope the world needs if it is to survive, to change and to reach shalom. We are to be the Advent hope.
Monday the First Week of Advent

I Look for Christ’s Coming in Unexpected Places

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent always comes from one of the Synoptic “mini-Apocalypses,” filled with wild statements about the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. Puzzling, yes; and often avoided in preaching, despite the lectionary’s recommendation. And yet, a clear reminder — and a warning — that Christ comes in unexpected ways, whether we’re talking Christmas, and a baby in a stable; or Easter, with the resurrected Jesus mistaken for a gardener or a Bible study companion on the way to Emmaus; or Christ present in our own times.

We must be awake, alert, on the watch, for we will inevitably be surprised by how Christ shows up in our lives. As Mary Oliver says in her poem, Praying:

> It doesn’t have to be the blue iris,  
> it could be weeds in a vacant lot,  
> or a few small stones,  
> just pay attention!

So where to encounter this new-born Christ? Perhaps in the Downtown Eastside, in the person who is hurting, in need, the person you connect with, whom you serve, who serves you, whom you love-through-action. Maybe by having your eyes opened by the artist William Kurelek and his paintings of Jesus being born in modern Canadian settings (A Northern Nativity). Or possibly in reflecting on the words of the mystic, Angelus Silesius, “If in your heart you make a manger for his birth, then God will once again become a child on earth.”

This Advent season, try wearing “4-D resurrection glasses” — who knows what glimpses you might catch of God’s holy love walking in the world.

The Rt. Rev. Gary Paterson  
Moderator, United Church of Canada  
VST Alum, 1977

Tuesday the First Week of Advent

I am Carrying the History of this School in my Heart

I have worked at VST since 1981. I have worked at VST longer than any staff or faculty. I have worked with six principals! I am the housekeeper for this community. I have seen a lot of change!

When I came to the school I did not know a word of English — really! The students taught me my English. I love the school. I always think of the chapel and all of the buildings as the House of God. My work is to clean the house of God. People here are very positive about God. I enjoy my Theological conversations with the students and people say that I have a gift. When I see a student who seems confused or down I speak to them and encourage them. I have the gift of coming here for thirty some years.

I am a Roman Catholic. I respect every religion and I believe that there is one God of all. What is my Advent prayer for this Community? I am carrying the history of this school in my heart. I pray for peace and health for everyone in the community. I pray to see the School moved to the new building. I pray it will be our last move! In the move God will be our shepherd and with Richard as our principal I believe we will get there.

I am inspired to get up at 5:30 every morning to come to work. Before the doors were set by computer I was the one who opened them every morning. More recently I can wake up with an ache or a pain here or there. I wonder can I do this today? Then I say to myself “What are you thinking I need to be up and go and clean the house of God!”

Lucy Lima  
Housekeeping Supervisor
The story of a baby born in a manger who “saves the world” can sound absurd, miraculous, sentimental, or perhaps just silly. How can one take Christmas seriously? Actually, I believe there are a number of ways, but I will just mention one. Advent is the time of year when Christians celebrate the incarnation of God, the time of learning who God is and who we are. Hence, it could not be more serious. The “incarnation” means God with us in the “face” of Jesus Christ. “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Cor.4:6). The life, teaching, and death of Jesus gives us a clue, a hint, of how we should speak of that great mystery, God. The biblical story of Jesus is one of siding with the oppressed, telling parables where the weak and the poor are favoured over the strong and wealthy, and of dying on a cross as the culmination of a life lived entirely through self-emptying love. Since we are “the image of God,” we also learn from the story of Jesus who we are. And in a curious twist, what the world sees as weakness and loss (epitomized by a baby!) turns out to be the way to abundant life for all. Why is this true?

When we are faced with overwhelming problems, whether in our own lives (our own death or of a loved one) or in the public life (the destruction of climate change) we know we cannot solve them on our own. We know also that our efforts are invariably “ego” driven, in which we try to save ourselves at the cost of other people and the planet. What the “face” of Jesus tells us is that there is another way. It is only by the self-emptying of our egos so as to create room for God to act in us, allowing us to participate in divine self—sacrificing love, that there may be hope for ourselves and the world. Kenosis, self—emptying love, tells us that WE cannot save either ourselves or the world—only God can. But we are “the hands and feet” of God in the world, and are called to be God’s helpers. Since God does not save us or the world through one-way, all controlling power, neither should we use such power. Rather, we human beings, created in the image of God, are called to a life of self-emptying love as the way to human fulfillment and planetary flourishing.

At a time of great public and planetary turmoil, when we can easily lose hope in our ability to make a difference in the world, let us learn from the incarnation both who God is and who we are; namely, those who practice self-emptying love for others. So, when we get “fed up” with Christmas, with the insatiable consumerism and sentimentality, let us recall its serious side: it is the beginning of the daunting story of self-emptying love in both the life of God incarnate and in our own lives.

Sallie McFague  
Distinguished Theologian in Residence, VST

Thursday the First Week of Advent  
A Prayer for the Transition of the VST Library

Loving God
Grant us your gifts of wisdom, of kindness
And of peace
in the midst of
what can feel like upheaval

As we embrace the newness
you provide

We ask that the ministry of this school
And its library
be energized
by your call
to scholarship
to community support and to individual service.

Help us remain faithful to the
Wisdom of past disciples

Embracing the new roads
given us by today’s disciples

This we ask
In Jesus’ name

Amen.

Faye Chisholm  
Library Public Services Coordinator
Friday the First Week of Advent

On Hope

Where do we find hope this Advent in our world of extremist armies and terrorism, political scandals and epidemics?

Hope is awakened in those impossible situations that confront us, theologian of hope Jurgen Moltmann tells us.

He should know.

In 1944, Moltmann was drafted into the German army and sent to the Belgian front where the trauma of war led to a crisis of the soul. “The friend standing next to me at the firing predictor was torn to pieces by the bomb that left me unscathed. That night I cried out to God for the first time: ‘My God, where are you?’ And the question ’Why am I not dead too?’ has haunted me ever since. Why are you alive? What gives your life meaning? Life is good, but to be a survivor is hard. One has to bear the weight of grief. It was probably in that night that my theology began, for I came from a secular family and knew nothing of faith. The people who escaped probably all saw their survival not just as a gift but as a charge too.” (The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life)

Moltmann surrendered to the first British soldier he met and spent the remainder of the war years in prisoner of war camps in Belgium, Scotland and England. His faith journey began in a POW cell when a chaplain gave him a copy of the New Testament and the Psalms.

Each of us has our own private cells of despair we have visited where all hope has died. Resist death. Hope meets us in the call to life!

This Advent, take up the charge. Commit yourself to one small transformative act of hope in a place where there is suffering. Do it in anticipation of that great divine transformation when the fullness of the Kingdom of God will break into the world.

Robert Clare
Director, The Elders’ Institute

Saturday the First Week of Advent

John the Baptist

Christmas cards are often merely “pretty.” Famed preacher, Will Willimon says John the Baptist gets introduced into the story to keep it from becoming a Hallmark occasion. For sure, no one would call John the Baptist “pretty,” his cloak shaped from rough camel hair cinched in with a leather belt and his breath smelling of wild honey and locusts. (Locusts taste like sardines which have exceeded their best by date.) His message isn’t pretty either, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” At least this year in the lectionary, we hear Mark’s story, not Luke’s cheerful message, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” But it is clear enough from Mark also that John’s message isn’t an easy one. He is “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And people, hear; they flock to the desert to be baptized.

This may be the one time of the year that people still flock to church, at least on Christmas Eve, but I can’t imagine that it is because they want to hear about repentance or forgiveness of sins. They want carols and cradles and Christmas trees. But Christmas will make very little difference without repentance. The word repentance is based in the end on the Hebrew word for “turn.” Unless we turn from a way of life that may be destructive to self, to others and to the planet and turn to One who can give us a new way of life Christmas remains merely pretty. You can’t get to Bethlehem except by way of the desert and we are unlikely to meet the One Who Is Coming unless John is our guide. And from that One we may find the forgiveness that, deep down, we know we need.

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Farris
Moderator, Presbyterian Church in Canada
Professor of Homiletics
Sunday the Second Week of Advent

What the Early Church can teach us about waiting in Advent

There is a story about the Silvania, a fifth century woman who retreated to the Egyptian desert to contemplate and pray. Her biographer writes how “she was most erudite and fond of literature” and how she turned night and day to read “three million lines of Origen and two and a half million lines of Gregory” as well as other early theologians. This, the biographer states, “she did not read once only and in an offhand way, but she worked on them, dredging through each work seven or eight times.” At the end of the account her biographer states, “by good hopes she transformed herself into a spiritual bird and so made the journey to Christ.” (Palladius, Lausiac History, 55). By good hopes…. The early Christians Silvania studied and read had something in common: they were all theologians of hope. That is, they believed that God was so at work in the world that in the fullness of time, all, even the most wicked and nefarious of creatures, would join in the hymn of praise to God. This has always been the article of hope of Christians, that finally nothing will separate anything in creation from the love and glory of God. The Gregory Silvania was reading called this hope of universal reconciliation “apokatastasis” — the hope for a universal restoration of all things. Gregory, like other Christians, hoped for this because this is what hope hopes for: that all may be well, not just for us, but for our neighbour as well, however bad s/he may be, and not just for our human neighbour but for all of creation. For Silvania and those she poured over in study this was not a future story, it was also a present one. One commentator calls this realized apokatastasis. That is, the hope for universal restoration begins with our practices of restoration now. This means that the future is not something we await passively. Advent rather calls us to the present practice of the future, that all may be well with us and with as many around us as possible.

Monday the Second Week of Advent

It’s all about Love

“Behold,” begins the story of love. “Look.” Where else could it begin? By what means other than by paying attention do we expect to encounter the one who came to share our life, to redeem and raise human life in love?

We’re used to it now, now that we have followed him for a while. We’re used to where he goes and who he’s with. We’ve noticed who his mother was, where he was born, who his friends were, where he travelled, where he stayed. In every case he was with the people who have the least, who suffer the most, who are a hair’s breadth from danger, a hair’s breadth from the edge. “Behold.” Notice. When the world looks one way, he looks the other and that made all the difference. It is the act of paying attention that makes the invisible visible, that raises life from not mattering to mattering. That is why one saint called paying attention “love.” More than this, she called “love” paying attention (S. Weil).

So what if we, like him, were to notice? To “behold” the orphans of Ebola, the refugees in Sicily, the Syrians in Turkey. “Behold” the people who are fragile and lonely. Behold them in shelters and hospitals. Behold missing girls and violated women. “To behold” because that is where the story of love begins. What if this is how we too were made? Fashioned for one another, made to turn toward each other and not away. Perhaps in the end, it is not about social justice (though this is important). Perhaps it is about love, love that brings us to life. The word for being brought to life is “joy.” Perhaps God-with-us is about that. “Behold, I bring good tidings of great joy.”

Harry Maier
Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Studies

Janet Gear
Assistant Professor of Public and Pastoral Leadership, VST
Director of Denominational Formation (United Church of Canada)
The Grace of Advent

The season of Advent is a welcome counterpoint to the frenzy of a commercialized Christmas season. Its simple grace comes from the themes sounded in the passages from scripture appointed for the Sundays of the season.

The first theme is the future. Apocalyptic texts from Hebrew and Christian scriptures face into the discontent of our time, longing for God to intervene: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down..." prays Isaiah. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus invites his disciples into a time of mindfulness with the words “Keep awake.” In Advent we are invited to wake up and see the future as the place where God is going to act.

A second theme is repentance — an invitation into the larger mind of God’s active spirit. It is John the Baptist who sounds this theme, described in Mark’s gospel as “…proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” A larger mind — the grace of knowing that at God’s heart is the practice of forgiveness — and it can be so for us also.

The third theme is God’s justice — with the text from Isaiah 61 that Jesus used at his first sermon in Nazareth, “…the Lord has anointed me… to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...” It is a clarion call to the grace of longing for a better world.

And the last theme is one of availability — Mary, in Luke’s gospel says to the angel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” This is the grace of opening ourselves to be instruments of God’s love in the world.

May you know the grace of this holy season.

Peter Elliott, D.D. (honoris causa, VST, 2009)
Dean, Anglican Diocese of New Westminster
Rector of Christ Church Cathedral
Chancellor, Vancouver School of Theology

Waiting for Justice & Wisdom

Hummingbird Ministries was established in January 2005 but it has been a lifetime endeavour. I always thought it was me waiting for God to open the doors. But now I realize that it was God who waited for me all these years to be ready to begin this healing and reconciliation ministry.

I had to go through many years of healing and learning to be able to express and verbalize a vision about what I wanted to do for the healing of my people. There were so many social prejudices to overcome — the shame of: poverty; being Cree; and being thought of as dumb, drunken Indians.

I studied at University of Alberta to learn about the loss of our lands, our economies, our culture, our spirituality, and our children through the residential school system. And finally I understood what my dad meant, when he said, “My girl, our people suffer a lot, go get an education and one day, maybe you can help our people in some way.”

I studied theology to understand what my mom meant when she said, “We were all made from one Creator. Why would he give us our culture and languages, and then turn around and dishonour him by throwing it all away?”

So, maybe when we say we are waiting for God to come, we don’t realize he is already there, born in our hearts and waiting for us to be ready. Maybe Hummingbird Ministries would have been established earlier if I had understood justice and theology as my parents did. Or if I had understood Jesus like my mom and my mosoom did, as a friend of Indigenous people, accepting and meeting us where we are at. Perhaps the waiting is not so much about God as about us.

The Rev. Mary Fontaine
Founder & Director of Hummingbird Ministries
Thursday the Second Week of Advent

Waiting as a Taste of Heaven

Observant Jews (like me) spend half our lives waiting for Shabbat. Shabbat: the day of rest. Under ideal conditions, that means twenty — five hours of eating, sleeping, singing, poetic praying, socializing, reading, and walking outdoors. Twenty—five hours, from sundown on Friday until dark on Saturday, dedicated to simple acts of reconnecting and refreshing. Twenty-five hours without email, financial transactions, or activities related to our paid work.

Six days of waiting would make us quite anxious, if we waited passively. But we don’t. We practice active waiting, better called “anticipation” or even “preparation.” On Wednesday, we begin greeting Jewish friends with “Shabbat Shalom” — “May the peace of Sabbath be with you.” On Thursday evening, many of us shop and cook, finalizing dinner invitations if we are having guests. In our family’s household, Friday afternoon is the busy time. We clean house and shop for fresh vegetables. We visit the credit union, ritually enacting a close to the business week. We make mental lists of tasks we need to complete or resolve to temporarily let go of. If we have worried about a friend or relative during the week, we phone them to check in. And then, we unwind, snack, sing, cook, and prepare to sit down together to share blessings, conversation, and laughter.

It’s funny how “waiting” for Shabbat makes us busier — a good kind of busier, as if anticipation is itself a kind of celebration. Talmud, the big book of rabbinic law and lore, calls Shabbat a “taste of the world to come,” meaning a taste of heaven or of Messianic time. Imagine if we bend the metaphor a bit, understanding Shabbat as the “world to come” and active waiting as the “taste.” Then, waiting itself becomes heavenly.

Friday the Second Week of Advent

A Unitarian Waits in Advent – In Four Acts

Hope
The final colours lose their tentative grasp and return to the earth. Nourishing the soil, blanketing the path, rendering the branches visible. Have you noticed the beauty of their now leaf—less silhouette? What bare beauty are you guarding? Let go of those old colours, let them fall from your tightly clenched fist. Amazement is just around the corner.

Preparation
Twinkling lights entice us to purchase shiny new things. Is it really more things we need? Lean into the dwindling light, relish this season of renewal. Take time to prepare for the miracles and wonders about to unfold.

Joy
Gifts to share, warm embraces. Hearts are full, waiting for the birth of new life. Perhaps it’s the anticipation that brings such joy. Perhaps its knowing we will make it through the darkness once again. Or is it in the deepening of our spirit as we decide what is really important? Letting go of the unnecessary, emptying makes room for abundant joyful yearnings.

Love
Look around you, love isn’t everywhere. Where are you needed? What does your light of love long to illuminate? There is so much to give, there is so much to learn. We have waited enough, Great love requires us to wake up. What is the loving action you are waiting to do? What is the colour of your flaming love?
Saturday the Second Week of Advent

What Liturgy can call us to this Advent

For many of us liturgically accustomed to seasons in the Northern Hemisphere, Advent is an attractive time. We love the Advent wreath, the evergreen fragrance, the holly's hues, the fires' warmth. As we mark the winter solstice, returning light in the sky associates well with the coming of Christ's light into our hearts and lives.

But — what happens to Advent in the Southern Hemisphere? What role can liturgy offer Australians and New Zealanders whose midsummers are increasingly TOO warm? What imagery works in sub Saharan Africa when the solstice light slowly begins to WANE?

Our Christian companions from southern realms do not lack liturgical imagination! Some offer a new Advent expression by using the stars of the Southern Cross. Their wreath is of four white candles decorated with stars.

The new approach is prompted by astronomical, historical and biblical images. In the southern night sky, the four central stars of the Southern Cross shine permanently above. From ancient times, these stars offered Indigenous ocean navigators a sure sense of direction. The saints are called to shine like the stars of the night in the book of Daniel. A star guided the Magi to the Christ child. The book of Revelation calls Christ the morning star.

Globalization is not all bad. Awareness that Advent is a season of preparation for Christians wherever on the earth we live removes tendencies to romanticize holly, forgetting that Advent's candles are for calling, not comfort. We are called to shine like Christ, seek Christ, rise each day into the ministry of Christ. This is more than waiting for him to show up. This is using his clear and permanent sense of direction to inspire our own.

Whether we mark our Advent with wreaths that are green or wreaths that are star-clad, may we mark it with wreaths that encircle love for the whole sphere that is our planet.

Paula Sampson
Director, Indigenous Studies Centre

Sunday the Third Week of Advent

Advent Joy

Last time I went on a rant about the difficulty of being joyful it was because I had gained weight and there were silver fish in my bathroom. As I write this meditation joy is obscured for more profound reasons — I write in the season of deep poignancy, sandwiched as we are between All Saints and Remembrance Days. Held in that time when the veil between the living and the dead, between unspeakable suffering and deep gratitude, is very thin. But now too, as you read this in the season of Advent, the veil between lament and joy is dissolving.

One of my all time favourite phenomena is the early evening flight of the crows as they return to their rookeries. There is an almighty population of crows that reside somewhere out by BCIT and if you're lucky, and you're in late afternoon slow moving traffic below their flight path, you get to watch this marvellous, miraculous migration. Like a wide avian commuter jam they come together, merging in from vast areas, finding their way together, taking their path home before the night falls. More than once this staggering sight has dragged me out of an unconscious fugue and into joy. Inexpressible joy. Awe. Gratitude. Prayer. Craning my neck to follow their path my heart beats on a much lighter rhythm and I almost drive off the road. Ambushed by God’s joy as the Spirit glides and wheels through the raucous, noisy, messy reality of crows.

Thank God it’s not about me and it’s not up to you to create joy. It’s about our openness to be surprised and drive off the road when joy overcomes us. To hell with the weight gain and the silver fish! Let the crows fly away with your hearts.

Debra Bowman
Coordinating Minister, Ryerson United Church
Monday the Third Week of Advent

The Challenges Advent Calls Us To

Please read Romans 13: 8-12
"The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber..."

I walked into a coffee shop recently “vertical but not yet awake.” Crossing the threshold into busy café, I left the cold rain behind and was welcomed by the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans. “I feel like I spend half my life waiting,” grumbled the man ahead. Waiting. As Christians we are moving into a time and season of waiting. Advent comes from the Latin word Adventus meaning “visit” or “coming” and provides a time where we wait for the coming of Jesus Christ in our lives and our hearts. We spend a lot of time waiting in our lives.

Waiting for a new child or grandchild to be born.
Waiting for the employer’s call after the job interview.
Waiting for test results from the Doctor’s office.
Waiting for a miracle or sign of faith in a time of trouble.

Waiting in Advent can be a difficult discipline and we recognize that while this is supposed to be “the happiest time of year” for many the reality and flood of memories can make it anything but grand. The Apostle Paul declares that the hour has arrived to wake from our slumber. “Salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” Salvation, also translated as “wholeness” is nearer than when you first became a Christian. Imagine. This might be the Christmas where you experience wholeness through Christ’s love like never before. That’s good news worth waiting for…

Prayer: Almighty God, we praise you for your love and faithfulness to all generations. In this season of waiting, awaken us to your power and purpose in our lives that we may move from darkness to light and rejoice in your gift of Emmanuel — God with us. In the strong name of Jesus we pray…Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ross Lockhart
Director of Ministry Leadership & Education, St. Andrew’s Hall
Presbyterian Denominational Director

Tuesday the Third Week of Advent

A Transitions Prayer

Advent is a time of waiting and the VST community waits to move into our new building. As we journey through this season of Advent may we also see the waiting, at VST, through new eyes. May we wait in hope, love, joy, and peace.

And so we pray…

For the Hope to move through this time of Advent’s ‘new beginning’ waiting
And for the Hope to move through this time of VST’s ‘new building’ waiting

For the Love to grow through this time of Advent’s ‘renewed faith’ empowering
And For the Love to grow through this time of VST’s ‘renewed purpose’ empowering

For the Joy to imagine through this time of Advent’s ‘all things new’ making
And for the Joy to imagine through this time of VST’s ‘old visions new’ making

For the Peace to extend through this time of Advent’s ‘new justice’ forging
For the Peace to extend through this time of VST’s ‘new friendship’ forging

Amen

Margaret Trim
ThM Student
Coordinator of Academic Records and Admissions
Wednesday the Third Week of Advent

Locating ourselves in Advent

Each year we notice when “the holiday season” begins. It used to be after Remembrance Day, then it was after Halloween, now it is before Halloween when the advent calendars and bags of candy sit side by side on store shelves. Who decides when the holiday begins? Does it now belong only to those who seek to benefit from it economically? Or does it belong to those of us who perennially resist common holiday culture holding fast to the strict parameters of our faith tradition—four weeks, four Sundays, four candles, a nativity and finally a silent night? Locating our quest for incarnation in a season with multiple promises is always a challenge. Habitually, we go where we know. We go to the sacred places where we can trust the story of Christ’s coming to be told, the advent wreaths that find their way to our tables or the crèche that we unwrap figure by figure in a practice of reenactment. I read, recently, a report by UNESCO about the work to make the Church of The Nativity in Bethlehem a UN Heritage site. This will afford it protection and provide resources for its preservation.

In addition to being at the matrix of historical and current conflict, the Church of the Nativity, the place that marks the birth of Christ and God’s radical incarnation also competes with the realities of our time. It is at risk from the outside due to development, pollution, and political unrest. So too it is at risk of diminishment from the inside — caretakers (churches) at odds with whose responsibility it is to preserve it and an overpopulation of tourists and pilgrims seeking to come and see the place of intersection between heaven and earth. We cannot help but clamour for the protection it needs. We cannot help but try to locate ourselves there. This is what we long for. I recently heard sacred or holy space defined simply as “space where god is recognized and engaged”* In the absence of a pilgrimage to Bethlehem geographically, spiritually our inn might be simply to stop, amidst the external and internal pressures, when we mark a moment or place where God is known and engaged. Preserving incarnation will be less about resistance and more about embracing wonder wherever it intersects with us.

Thursday the Third Week of Advent

A Prayer from the Downtown Eastside

Dear Creator, You always know, even when my actions deny, the deeper longings of my heart. You hold me fast to You, though I am unaware of it, You never let me fully depart. I ran so fast through life, did not stop to smell a rose, didn’t even pause to see the beauty amid the grief and pain and that if I would just pause a while I would hear you calling me. You call me in the faces of the broken and downtrodden and say look, look inside. It is in these my little ones, in the one’s thrown away by all, it is in such as these, that I reside. Once I became aware that those faces mirrored mine and of Your unrestricted love I can finally see all creation is loved by You and hear You say, “Come rest in my love.” And as I rest in You, my Lord, I know what I must do is give away, what You give to me tho’ you give me more and more for love is not to be hoarded but shared, until all abide in thee. When we have learned to love each other, all your creation with a love that can be called sublime, we will then be ready to rebirth Your Son from within ourselves, that day is the “fullness of time”.

Rev. Brenda Fawkes
Director of Theological Field Education

Victoria Marie, PhD, M.Div
VST Alumni – 2014, M.Div
VST Student, 1st Year – ThM
Friday the Third Week of Advent

Let justice roll down like waters (Amos 5:24)

As Advent nears, we anticipate the Kingdom of Heaven where God’s justice flows like waters, proclaimed by Jesus who has come to earth from above by God’s over — flowing love.

God gives rain and sunshine to all without discriminations (Matthew 5:45). However, born with various inequalities, life experiences of human beings are quite different and unequal even under the same sun. It is the reality of life. If so, how should we understand these inequalities with God’s will? Is God ignorant or tolerant of such reality on earth? No, because God is who “maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor (Psalm 140:12).” Therefore, there must be a reason and God’s intention for inequalities. In fact, God’s such intention is on “flow (flowing).” God wants us to make “flow” between inequalities as well as to participate in such mystery of life.

If there are no “highs and lows,” “more and less,” “or “strong and weak,” and instead, if all is even and equal, “flow” would not happen. However, “flow” is the most essential and indispensable nature of life. Water, air, and blood in body must flow. Money, in particular, should flow well for sound economy although it, by its nature, is inclined not to flow. God’s justice Amos proclaimed (5:24) should be considered with the implication of this “flow,” and it may be the way God “executes justice for the poor.” However, greedy and self-centered human beings block or change the direction of “flow,” so money flows from the low to the high, or from the weak to the strong. This is an evil way of “flow,” and not God’s intention.

We should remember “the supreme good is like water (Lao Tzu, viii) as we wait for God’s justice flowing like waters in this Advent season.

Saturday the Third Week of Advent

A Faith for Advent

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being “in him was life,“ and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

I’m one of those people who has to have complete darkness in order to sleep and to dream. I learned this the hard way when new neighbours moved in next door to me on the bedroom side of my house and regularly left lights on (inside and out) that streamed through the flimsy curtains that hung on my bedroom windows.

It took me a year of fretting and turning and pinning towels and quilts up on curtain rods to realize that I needed to do something more. Finally one day I ordered light blocking shades for my windows. A week later, my bedroom at night was so dark I could not see my hand in front of my face. I nestled down, closed my eyes and slept deeply, contentedly and (this is not really a word!) “velvetly” for the first time in a year.

And yet, if scientists are right, we human beings are doing everything we can to destroy the very thing that makes it possible for some of us to sleep and to dream. Verlyn Klinkenborg in the National Geographic article entitled Our Vanishing Night put it this way: “Most of humanity lives under intersecting domes of reflected, refracted light, of scattering rays from overlit cities and suburbs, from light — flooded highways and factories.”

Advent is about waiting in the dark. Advent is about letting go of what we believe we know in the light of day and waiting, waiting, waiting to see what emerges from the darkness that is our waiting.

In this Advent season, what do you need to wait for in the dark? How can you create a place of darkness for yourself that encourages your waiting?

Young-Geun Kim
Student, 4th Year, M.Div.

The Rt. Rev. Melissa Skelton
Bishop, Anglican Diocese of New Westminster
Sunday the Fourth Week of Advent

Why the Magnificat Matters

In certain translations of the Magnificat, Mary tells us her soul magnifies God and this matters. While this is not an originally intended image, what comes to my mind is the image of the soul as a magnifying glass. And like a magnifying glass her soul enlarges, opens, and brings detail and focus to the Divine. Her soul magnifies God for all who would like to see through her glass.

Now, we think of the things we put under a magnifying glass as very small, the smallest things. How can the transcendent Creator of the cosmos be magnified by a soul? It still is an astonishing claim. And yet Mary makes it. Then the God she magnifies does something no other thing under a magnifying glass can do. God — who does inhabit the smallest things — magnifies the glass of her soul, increasing its breadth and clarity and purity, rendering her glass as dazzling to the beholder. And as we sing, pray, say the Magnificat with her, we are making the same claim that we magnify God. In the Magnificat, we are turning the glass of our souls ever more towards the Divine who will make us radiant and clear and refined in focus even in the darkest night.

Rev. Jessica Schaap
Rector, St. Paul’s Anglican Church, Vancouver
VST Alumni, 2008 – M.Div

Monday the Fourth Week of Advent

Waiting Patiently with Hope and Joy

The rush, the clamour, the season of Advent has arrived. Just in time for when many of us are overwhelmed, double booked and are burdened with extra work. The end of year stress has reached a boiling point and before we realize it we have been carried away by this stress. The season of Advent is hurried along only to be replaced with a season of buying and of excess. Why hurry this long awaited time? Why get upset, angry or depressed when things do not happen on our timetables? Instant gratification has taught us that anything with a long wait isn’t worth getting. Advent however beckons us to a time of active waiting that widens our hearts and guides us to a time of wonder and peace.

You may think that patience has dissipated like the bubbles out of a glass that has sat out for too long. God has a wonderful sense of humour. While we may be short on patience, God provides us with many opportunities in which we can practice patience; with our loved ones, our colleagues and with ourselves. A river flows at its own pace and no one can slow it down. Advent slows us into the careful work of God.

Hope demands our attention. As the days shorten and the nights grow weary; a year breathes its final breaths. Hope orients our hearts, fuelled by the grace of God. Hope combats the exhaustion, and the endlessness that many feel. Advent brings with it hope so that the night — time is alive with the twinkling of a thousand stars. With hope, indeed all is well.

Our response, our elated response, is joy. A Joy that comes from the happiness, awareness of abundance and the deep satisfaction that swells from within as we continue to love and serve each other. During this season of advent may you wait patiently with hope and joy.

Janik Livera
Student, 1st Year, M.Div.
Tuesday the Fourth Week of Advent
How my work with Seniors informs my Advent

Advent we are told is a time of waiting, a time of expectation, a time of preparation. Some ask; what are we waiting for? What are we expecting? What are we preparing for?

I am privileged to work as a Chaplain in a Care Home and I write this reflection from that context. The beautiful people I minister to live in an almost constant state of waiting, expectation, and preparation, though not necessarily in that precise order or even all three at one time. Most wait patiently for whatever is to come, they don’t stress about the what ifs, their expectations are simple — to be cared for, to be fed, and hopefully to have someone show them affection. Their expectations are most often simple as well — to feel they are heard and respected.

These wonderful people don’t live in a constant state of “I have so much to do between now and Christmas mindset that so many fall victim to at this time of year, instead they take each day as it comes for better or not. They find joy in simple things, watching the leaves fall from the trees, participating in activities, celebrating with each other the milestones of life.

I continue to marvel at the grace each resident shows even when life is not kind.

Advent is a time of waiting, a time of expectation, and a time of preparation. Advent is also a time for listening, and I am learning through my work to embrace the simplicity of all those things and not clutter the waiting, the expectation, the preparation, and the listening with anxieties that may draw my focus away from the messages of Hope, Love, Promise, and Light, God’s gift to all.

Rev. Georgina Harris
Chaplain George Derby Care Center

Christmas Eve
And a little child shall lead them

The calf and the lion and the fatling together,
And a little child shall lead them. Isaiah 11: 6

What is it that makes us use violence to settle our conflicts? Why do nations make military budgets a priority? Why do we punish the lawbreaker without offering effective rehabilitation? Why is it that the only way we know how to build ourselves up, is by somehow diminishing another?

Our instincts make us want to protect ourselves and those that we love and that which is ours, first and foremost. That is why the image of the peaceable kingdom is so startling. It goes against our instincts.

The image of those who would normally be adversaries, of those who have immense power over another — co-existing in harmony, rattles our sensibilities. And yet, this vision that upsets our innate impulses reveals to us what our deepest yearnings are made of. Even deeper than our instincts, lies the desire to live in right relationship. This is how God fashioned us. This is God’s deepest yearning for us.

And through the birth of a tiny, poor and vulnerable baby, we live in hope for this deepest yearning to be fulfilled. We know this because we know that it is not through our own instinct that we forgive a friend for revealing a confidence, that we are moved to offer assistance by the story of an immigrant who can’t find work, that we give away our money to help others in the midst of this spending frenzied season. We know this hope for authentic and right relationship is real because it is awakened deep within us, through the cry of a newborn child.

Rev. Lori Megley—Best
Minister, Cloverdale/Hazelmere United Churches
VST Alumni, 2012 — MATS
Christmas Day

Imagining Christmas — Adoration of the Shepherds

In a 1646 painting attributed to Rembrandt, the artist depicts shepherds hands raised in a gesture of amazement and prayer adoring Jesus. One shepherd faces Jesus. Another shepherd’s back faces the person viewing the painting, almost as if to invite us to the same worship response to the Word made flesh. What you are seeing is ‘God with us’ and it invites doxological response more than dispassionate analysis.

The artist uses light to interpret the Gospel of the Incarnation. While a third shepherd holds a lantern, more light radiates from the Christ Child than the lantern. The baby Jesus illumines the whole scene, including a dimly lit cross formed by the rafters. He is the light of the world, the future Saviour at the centre of the scene. The light creates intimacy among the characters.

All around this humble rude setting — crouching, sitting, standing — are ordinary people and other creatures: a mother raising her child to catch sight of Jesus, bystanders chatting, a cow looking on, a child with a dog. All of them give the scene a domestic, informal but sacred sense. The picture says — ‘Christ was born for this!’

It turns out that this painting was not done by Rembrandt, but by one of his advanced students. The student probably saw Rembrandt’s earlier painting of a similar scene while it was still in the studio. Inspired by Rembrandt’s imagining of Christmas, the student repeated the scene with variants. It’s the same light that enlightens everyone, everything but the setting is altered. Our imaginations are funded and inspired by the same Christmas story; by the grace of the Holy Spirit good students imagine what the light of the world means for our time and place.

Richard Topping
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