

**1 Advent
November 28, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Well, it's been a while! Three-and-a-half months to be exact. Caren and I traveled fourteen thousand miles, and visited 30 states.

It seems like you have been busy as well. Assisting two Afghan families resettle in the area. Supporting a Habitat for Humanity house with your generous gifts. Taking on extra dates for Dining With Dignity. Providing special holiday meals through the Ecumenical Food Pantry for those living with food insecurity. Beginning the Mission House construction project by repurposing the appliances, cabinets, counters ... even the kitchen sink. And, one of our own, called to be a priest in the Episcopal Church, received word that the Diocesan Commission on Ministry has recommended to Bishop Howard that she be a Postulant for Holy Orders ... which is the Church's language to say that Clerene can now begin her formal theological education. You are an amazing congregation made up of extraordinary people, and for that I am truly grateful. Maybe Caren and I should take more trips like this.

Yes, we drove fourteen thousand miles in our 100 square foot recreational vehicle. Our RV has a bed, toilet, shower, stovetop, microwave, sink and refrigerator all inside a Ford Transit ... kind of like an Amazon Prime delivery truck. We visited friends and family, holy places of many varieties, historic sites, and amazing vistas.

We had planned to head west for the first part of our trip, return to the East Coast for a family wedding, then head up to New England and drift back home with the fall weather. But the best laid plans went awry. The East Coast wedding ... in tidewater Virginia ... was cancelled because of COVID. Then, as the fall temperatures began to drop the RV's heater malfunctioned, so we made a change to a more southerly route.

But this was more than just a long road trip ... it was also a spiritual journey of sorts. I learned about forgiveness in a way I could not have known in any other circumstances. In the midst of the joy of seeing longtime friends was the experience of their confusion of our presence as a consequence of their dementia. And, in just a few short months we lost a number of mentors and spiritual advisors who had literally changed our lives. As we drove long miles we were reminded just how short the road ahead could be, and how valuable this fragile life really is.

One more piece before I turn ... we turn ... to the First Sunday of Advent. All of us have been living with this COVID pandemic for almost two years. Do you remember the anxiety in those first few weeks and months? The questions we had to live with: How was it spread? What were the best and most effective ways to protect oneself? We slowly learned how to stay safe,

then there was the anxiety about getting an appointment for the vaccine. But still the questions ... If we got two shots, are we safe? Do we still need to wear masks? Can we finally meet in groups ... like church ... and under what conditions?

Well, it's not over until it's over. We've all heard of the news about the Omicron variant in southern Africa that is quickly spreading around the world. But COVID has hit very close to home for me and Caren. Our entire family in New Mexico is sick with COVID as I speak. Parents Neal and Jamie are both fully vaccinated, as is 17 year-old Jax. But all three have breakthrough cases ... they have tested positive for COVID and very sick. The two youngest ... Marion (11 years-old), and Eldon (10 years old) were scheduled to receive their first vaccination this week. But they also tested positive and very sick. The whole family has been diligent about their safety in public ... avoiding any gatherings ... always, always wearing masks ... always, always staying socially distant. However, after months of home-schooling Neal took Marion and Eldon to a museum art class, and one by one the family became ill. It is not over until it is over. Please, please continue to stay safe ... for your sake, and for the sake of all those around you.

Which brings me ... and us ... to the First Sunday of Advent. The first of the four Sundays before the Feast of the Incarnation, commonly called Christmas. Advent is what the Church calls this season before Christmas ... Advent. It is the time for a people of faith to anticipate God coming alive in this world, just as God became alive in Jesus.

To the world around us today is the Sunday after Thanksgiving. The Sunday after Black Friday. The Sunday before Cyber Monday. The countdown for this season of consumerism that makes up thirty percent of retail sales for many companies.

So, just how are we, as people of faith, supposed to see this season? How are we to both be cognizant of the claims of the Church, and at the same time live in the reality of a commercial world? How do we resolve this tension? Is there a middle ground? Although the world moves to the beat of its own values, we, as people of faith, have access to the deep and ancient sacred rhythm handed to us by our spiritual ancestors.

It is a primary element of my faith and theology that God is alive in each of us, just as God was alive in Jesus. Therefore, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God's Son, we are celebrating the manifestation of the sacred in human form. Embedded in everything Jesus does and says is the proclamation that we are made in the image of God. The Incarnation is not just about Jesus, it is also about all humanity, and about each one of us. At Christmas we are celebrating the birth of Jesus, but we are also celebrating that divine and sacred power of God coming alive ... over and over again ... in each one of us.

So, through this season of Advent ... this time of preparation and anticipation ... what must we do to prepare for this Incarnation ... for the explicit manifestation of the indwelling of God's spirit within us? How might we live during this Advent so that it is more than just a season in the Church year? How might we be the sacred vessels of God's divine power within us while

living in the midst of the worldly concerns of today's times? How might we access this deep and sacred rhythm handed down to us by those people of faith that have proceeded us?

In our readings this morning, Jeremiah is longing for God to rule the world with justice and righteousness and peace; and Paul is yearning for a time when human behavior will be honorable and not profane. Jesus' apocalyptic message in Luke's Gospel would point us to the Son of Man rescuing the righteous at the end of time. I have the same yearnings and longings and desires for the manifestation of the holy in our world ... especially at this time in our history ... but I really don't think these are the answers to our questions about Advent.

If only we lived in such a world where there were no more wars, no quarreling and jealousy. If only we "abound[ed] in love for one another and for all." If only God would come and rescue the world from itself. If only ... if only. The fact is that we don't live, and can't live, in a world of "if only." We live in a world where life "is." This is God's creation with all its good and bad, evil and righteousness, and we must remember that we are made in God's image and called to be alive in God's divine power.

It is easy to look outward at the faults of the world. We can blame governments for wars, corporations for greed and materialism, and the people around us for quarreling and jealousy. But when we look in a mirror we see just ourselves. It would be nice if we could count on the Son of Man to come and bring judgment upon the world and rescue us from the plight that we have gotten ourselves into. But I think Jesus was telling us something more than that. I think Jesus was talking about awakening in each one of us the same divine power that was awakened in him.

So how do we live in that tension between the call of the spirit and the call of the world? How do we use this time of Advent to prepare ourselves for the incarnation? How do we access this sacred rhythm?

I think the first step is to become, and to stay, conscious of oneself and the world around you. Remember this is Advent. Remember this is based on an ancient and sacred rhythm. Remind yourself that it is Advent and that you are preparing to know the sacred presence of God alive within you.

Secondly, I believe that we need to let go of that which numbs us and keeps us unconscious. Make room for the holy by discarding the profane. Find a way ... even if it for just one brief moment each day ... to remind yourself that you are a beloved child of God ... made in the image of God ... and look for that yearning to have the divine come alive in you. One brief moment each day ... in your car ... over a cup of coffee ... maybe even while you brush your teeth. One moment of divine meditation.

Finally, look in the mirror and see the living presence of God. Look at your neighbor and see Jesus. Identify your attitudes and prejudices that keep you from executing justice and righteousness in your own world of family and friends and neighbors and community. Live

honorably by not labeling others as dishonorable. With an awakened consciousness be curious and see the world, and your place in it, in a new way.

This is the first Sunday of Advent. We enter the season of preparation ... anticipation ... for the Incarnation. The world wants us to prepare for a Christmas that has been co-opted to meet the needs of the world. We are caught in the tension between the call of the spirit and the call of the world. I encourage you to be open to another rhythm in the midst of the beat of the world. Live into the call of the spirit so that you can celebrate the divine power of God alive in your own life. God gave us Jesus to show what that life might look like. The power of God came alive in Jesus. Remember, it comes alive in you, also.

Amen.