
Advent #1: Longing
Martin Grove United Church
December 1, 2019
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Based on Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44

Happy New Year! What? You didn't know that today is the start of a new year? It's true. Because the Christian church calendar begins on the first Sunday in advent. And so, now, we are officially in year "A" of the 3 year lectionary cycle. Which means this coming year we will be hearing about the life of Jesus primarily through the lens of the gospel of Matthew - if we follow protocol anyway.

And so I now get to tell you that there are 2 reasons I don't like the Christian calendar. One simple, and one complex. The simple reason is that I'm not a big fan of Matthew's interpretation of Jesus. Because of all the gospels, Matthew was written to the community of people that is most unlike what Christian communities are like today. Not Matthew's fault of course, but that doesn't mean that I don't relate better to the vision of Jesus found in Mark and Luke. But we will survive, as we do every third year.

The second reason is more complex, and I hope, more interesting. I'll bet that you hope it's more interesting too. The second reason I don't like the Christian calendar is because of Advent.

Let's begin with a thought experiment. Imagine that I am standing here - right now - like I am. That's the easy part. Now here's the hard part: Imagine that I announce to you that the "son of God" will be arriving soon, somewhere, but imagine you have never ever heard this before. Imagine that everyone you know has never heard this before. Imagine that you are not even completely sure what I mean by the term "son of God". Oh - and you have to imagine that you believe me. Now, imagine what you would do following this service. What would you do after this service if you actually believed that the son of God was coming soon?

You would search, and talk to people, and follow social media hoping against hope to find this "son of God". You would be glued to any news source you could find. And you would have no idea what or who you were looking for. You might sell your

house in order to finance travel around the world so that you to go look for this “son of God” in as many places as possible. Perhaps not all of us would invest our life savings into this project, but I guarantee that all of us would go well outside our comfort zones to search for this “son of God”, this gift in our midst. We would all go crazy looking for this unknown “son of God” in our midst, right?

See - here’s the problem. Advent, we are told, is a time when we are invited to wait for, look for, and find Jesus in our midst. On the surface, that sounds like a fine project. The problem is that - because of the Christian calendar - we all know what to expect already. We know that Jesus will be born - metaphorically - on Christmas Day. We know that Jesus will appear as a baby. We know that Jesus will be born far away. I mean, really, there are simply no surprises left. Most of us likely do not feel called to go outside our comfort zones to find Jesus in our midst. Been there. Done that. Bought the t-shirt, right? The only thing we are likely waiting for is to discover when our local shops will start selling eggnog.

Let’s try another experiment. Let me ask you - what are you looking forward to as we head towards Christmas?

[descend and ask - what are people looking forward to?]

Now all of your expectations sound wonderful, and I honestly hope that you live out those hopes. But I do feel the need to mention that every single thing you mentioned was in many ways not what you look forward to, but rather what you look back on - trying to recapture the joy of past activities and memories. I understand that myself. Christmas is special in a very particular way when there are young children around for example and it’s easy to reflect back on those days warmly. It’s very natural that when we celebrate Christmas, many of us enjoy memories of Christmases past.

But my question remains unanswered. I asked what are you looking forward to? What new experiences are you open to? How far out of your comfort zone are you willing to go? How much discomfort are you willing to live with as you search for Jesus in our midst today? How much actual anticipation are you willing to live with?

Advent without any surprises can't really be much of an advent. The problem with advent is that we know how it turns out. Instead of feeling a call outside our personal comfort zones, many of us will see advent as an opportunity for nostalgia about Christmases past. There is nothing wrong with nostalgia per se, but that is a call to our past, not our future. Is it even possible for us to have any real sense of anticipation this advent? And if you think I'm picking on you here, I am directing the question at myself. I myself struggle to embrace anticipation during advent. Knowing what to expect is a double-edged sword because it sort of ruins the anticipation.

So this year, I have a strategy that will hopefully help us create some anticipation. I'm using this strategy in our Advent Groups. I'm using this strategy in worship. It's very simple: In order to find Jesus, we need to be looking for Jesus. And in order to look for Jesus - to truly look for Jesus - we have to long for something that is not already in our grasp. The first step in advent has got to be affirming that we are in fact longing for something that is beyond our grasp. Otherwise, there is simply nothing to look for. And if we don't actually look, we will not find anything either.

Now I hope that idea isn't too depressing for you. And in truth, it's not my idea anyway. In Isaiah earlier we read, "Let us walk in the light of the Lord!". But there cannot be a call to walk in the light if there is no darkness. There is no point trying to find the light unless we also understand and affirm darkness.

What does your heart truly long for? What inner darkness exists for you that is waiting, hoping, for the chance to walk in the light? Find that - and you just might find a great sense of anticipation this advent. Deep inner longings are not bad. Deep inner longings are how we find new life.

But what does it mean to long for something? In our society we generally don't long for things. We just go get them! Or if we can't get them for some reason, we rationalize that we don't need them, or we don't deserve them. Perhaps some of us have completely lost our ability to long. Sometimes we don't have feelings of longing because we have given up all hope of being satisfied, and so we stop looking. Sometimes we don't have feelings of longing because we have given up all hope. Sometimes we give up hope because our hopes have been dashed too many times. But that is complete

poppycock! Yes, strong language. That is poppycock! As Mel Robbins tells us, “Failure does not make us give up. Failure happens when we give up”. Advent is the season of hope, and embracing your own deep longings is a way to find that hope again.

According to the spiritual mystic Jaggi Vasudev, better known as Sadhguru, it is difficult for humans to feel a deep sense of longing because we snack too much, doing things that either distract us or perhaps titillate us. We shop, or knit, or watch youtube, or work too hard or whatever it is that distracts us from our own longing. Longing is a type of hunger. And with hunger for food, if you snack all the time, you never experience deep hunger. Similarly, if we have filled our lives with distractions, we will never understand our own deep longings. Sadhguru’s cure for this is something we won’t like at all. He suggests that we go home, paint one room entirely white, put a comfortable chair in there, and simply sit in the room - eyes open - for a few days, or perhaps a week. No reading. No writing. No TV. No talking. No thinking. He suggests that distancing ourselves from all distractions - in other words, stop snacking - allows us to find out what it is that we truly long for. I have to confess that sounds a bit extreme. But I would expect that the method works very well.

But I’m not going to do it myself. I’m not sure that I actually want to come face to face with my deepest longings. And yet, the words from Matthew remind us, “But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” If we don’t want to face our deepest longings today, then when? Tomorrow? Tomorrow may be too late. Besides, why would we want to put off a journey that will lead us to the fullness of life. Advent doesn’t last forever you know.

I believe that embracing our own deep longings is a spiritual gift. As I said, it is only by embracing our longings that we can look deeply for Jesus in our midst. I’m not sure how many of you are sold on this concept though. So let me close with this idea.

Christmas is coming, and for most of us, that brings to mind wonderful memories of friends and families, trees, gifts, presents, laughter, joy. If you share in those memories, I would invite you to consider that part of the gift of all that was that being

part of a family, or a group of friends that celebrated Christmas together, you felt that you belonged. Feeling that you belong can be a great source of comfort.

Belonging is wonderful. It is a gift. But it is also an invitation. The invitation is to be-longing. To be longing. To belong in such a safe space that you are free to experience your deepest longings. No need to pretend that you are OK. No need to pretend that you don't want the things you actually do want. No need to give up on your future. Just a need to embrace your longings.

Next week we will delve into looking for Jesus in our midst. You have 1 week to come to grips with your own deepest longings. If you are struggling to understand this, I encourage you to participate in one of our Advent Groups, when we will have more time to discuss this and share our own stories. Finding your own deepest longings is not a pointless exercise for the simple reason that you are worth it.

If you don't long for anything, how on earth can you hope to find Jesus in your midst? This Advent, you are invited to embrace your deepest longings as the first step in finding Jesus in your midst.

Hang on tight. Advent just might be worth anticipating after all!

Amen.