
Advent #2: Seeking
Martin Grove United Church
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Based on Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12

So - how did you all do with your homework from last week? You didn't honestly think I would forget about that, did you?

But since we had a bit of a snowstorm last week I'm going to begin by assuming that some of you were not here last week, so I should give you some chance to catch up. And I'm not completely delusional so I know that some of you simply forgot all about the assignment.

Here's the short version of what you may have missed last week. Advent is great, but one problem with Advent is that we know what to expect, and that makes it hard for us to experience any real anticipation. So last week I announced that I have a plan to increase anticipation this Advent. Here's the plan. During Advent, we are told that we need to find Jesus in our midst. But in order to find Jesus, we have to search for Jesus. And here's the catch. We can't really look for Jesus in our midst unless we accept that we long for something in life. We need to accept our own longings that are not only deep, but are beyond our grasp. We can't have any anticipation longing for something we already have. We need to come to terms with our own deepest longings if we actually want anticipation. And without anticipation, we won't go out of our own comfort zone to search for Jesus in our midst.

So the homework from last week was for each of us to reflect on our lives, and to try to figure out what it is that we deeply long for. And please do not be confused. If this sounds like some version of a self-help exercise - it is! But why would we look for Jesus if we don't want to find something important, like perhaps our own healing?

[ask: anyone willing to share what they long for]

Well, thanks for those of you who shared. I was hoping that some of you would be

willing to share. I was also hoping that many of you would not share - that you would not share out loud your deepest longings because they are simply too personal. And if that's your experience, then great! Advent is not a competition. Or if it is a competition, it's only between you and yourself to see how vulnerable you are willing to be with yourself. If Advent is a competition, it's only between you and yourself to see how far beyond your own comfort zone you are willing to go in your search for the divine in your midst.

OK - so now we have a grasp on our deepest longings. How does that relate to the idea of looking for Jesus in our midst? Well, perhaps there is a bit of confusion about what this whole "looking for Jesus" idea means.

One thing that "looking for Jesus" does *not* mean at Advent is looking for the historical Jesus. Looking for the historical Jesus means delving into history to see who Jesus was and how accurate the gospel stories are. Looking into the historical Jesus integrates the Bible, historical sources, an understanding of culture, and an understanding of human nature to create a vision of Jesus that is as realistic as we can find. Looking into the historical Jesus and his ministry is an interesting and worthwhile activity, and I encourage it. But that's not what Advent is calling us to. Because Advent calls us into our future, not our past. During Advent we are called to see who Jesus is, not who Jesus was.

So now I have just joined the long list of preachers who freely say that Advent is about looking for Jesus but have told you what looking for Jesus does *not* mean, rather than telling you what it *does* mean. I've just done something entirely traditional. And it didn't work at all.

Well, that's life I guess. For example, do you know that the Bible talks about the importance of forgiveness something like 89 times, but never once tells you how to do it? And I'm sure you've heard countless sermons about the importance of looking for Jesus in your midst but you were never told how to actually do that. Oh sure, the Bible will tell you that when you seek God you will fail if you have too much pride, or if you are seeking the wrong things in life, or if you are unrepentant. The Bible will tell you that your search for the divine will fail if you do not look with your whole heart, or if you are not sincere. Well, those statements are probably true, but that still doesn't tell us how to actually do it. How do we seek Jesus - or the divine if you prefer - in our midst?

In one sense, it's very simple. If the Jesus you seek is the answer to your own deepest longing, then you need to look wherever your longing takes you. But again, what does that look like? First of all, it is an invitation to look in strange or unfamiliar places. Here's what I found this week when I was driving home late one night and glanced at my car audio system.

[slide: born for advent]

According to the display on my audio system, I was listening to a song by the band "Styx" called "Born for Advent". Of course if you like Styx as much as I do you will know they never created a song by that name. The song that was blasting away as I drove home was actually, "Born for Adventure". On the surface the song isn't obviously a Christmas song - it describes the life of a person who steals from people and longs for a life of "women, whisky, and sin". But if nothing else, the song reminded me that Advent is an adventure. The song reminded me that Advent requires us to go beyond our comfort zone. And that reflection reminded me that the church has worked very hard over the years to squash that very thing.

This is well-summarized by Simon Jenkins in his book,

[slide: jumble sales of the apocalypse]

"Jumble Sales of the Apocalypse". I quote, "Western Christianity boasts some eccentric forms of religion, perhaps most famously the Pentecostal snake-handling churches of the Appalachian Mountains. Their favourite Bible verse isn't John 3:16, but the one where Jesus says in passing that his future followers would 'take up serpents' without harm. Unfortunately, the rattlesnakes they take to church don't hold the same interpretation of this proof text, with the result that quite a few believers have perished.

Snake-handlers aside, most of Western Christianity is an utter bore compared with the wild eccentricities of the Eastern church. Orthodox monks and nuns have lived up trees, in barrels, in bricked-up chapels or out in the fields grazing like sheep. St Simeon the Stylite started a craze among Syrian monks by balancing on top of a 50-foot pillar, drawing huge crowds and practising a kind of divine vertigo.

You'd think such extreme saints had reached the far end of austerity. But there was one final feat of mortification, and even the toughest men and women of the desert

were in awe of it. It was the calling to be a fool for Christ. The first of these mavericks was another Syrian saint, Simeon the Holy Fool, who lived quietly as a monk in a Dead Sea cave for 29 years. But then one day he set out for the city of Emesa. He had decided to mock the idiocy of the world and convert sinners by becoming a public fool.

During church services, he pelted the clergy with nuts. In the circus, he wrapped his arms around the dancing girls and went skipping across the arena. In the bath-house, he ran naked into the crowded women's section. On solemn fasting days he feasted riotously on beans, with predictable results. The locals saw him as a madman and beat him when his antics proved too much."¹ But holy fools went even deeper into the spectrum, and found the ultra-violet of holiness as divine lunatics, outsiders and troublemakers. They added one more impossible thing to their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and that was humility to the point of humiliation.

Our churches today - and our clergy - are completely boring by comparison. We seem to prefer the safe and the sensible to the edgy risings of the spirit. Where is there any space for adventure? Do we actually want an adventure?

Catholic reporter Rich Heffern defines adventure this way, "The definition of an adventure is an undertaking or enterprise of a hazardous nature. We have no way of discerning ahead of time what the outcome will be. If we could, it would lose its exciting aspect."² This advent, are you looking for adventure? Are you looking for adventure even if it might lead to something of a "hazardous nature"?

Perhaps this Advent we should all go out of our own comfort zones and follow St Simeon, the "Holy Fool". Not that we should act stupidly, but that we should act without caring about what other people think about us. To act on our impulses of love and gratitude, without worrying about how others will view us. But you don't need to throw nuts at me. Go - and be that person who buys coffee for random strangers. Go - and be that person who holds doors open and greets strangers warmly. Go - and go slightly out of your way to be helpful to others. In our modern day-and-age, that is seen as foolish. Go - and be a holy fool.

¹ <https://shipoffools.com/2019/07/in-praise-of-holy-fools/>

² <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/earthbeat/eco-catholic/adventure-advent>

You won't be the first. Isaiah reminds us of the vision of a peace so profound that the lion will lie down with the lamb.

[slide: iron will lie down with the lamp]

What could be more foolish than that? And Matthew reminds us of how crazy John was, "Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey" What could be more foolish than that? The only think more foolish than that would be calling the religious leaders of his day a "brood of vipers" - wait - John did that too!

This Advent, search for Jesus in your midst by playing a holy fool - stop caring what other people think and just go where your heart leads you. Go beyond your comfort zone by ignoring what other people think. Don't waste any time wondering if what you do makes sense. Go for the adventure of Advent. Engage with strangers. Reach out to others in your midst, particularly those who might need the touch of God in their lives. Who knows, you just might find Jesus in your midst.

[slide: born for advent]

Besides you have nothing to lose. Even if you don't happen to notice Jesus in your midst, you'll have a great time. But I think you will find more than that. You were born for Adventure. And you were born for Advent. Now go - and make a fool of yourself!

Amen.