
Advent #3: Finding
Martin Grove United Church
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Based on Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

So - how's your Advent going so far? Someone asked me last week if I was ready for Christmas. But they probably won't ask me again. Because I responded that I'm working through this whole idea of longing, seeking, and finding. My lead up to Christmas this year is all about accepting my deepest longings, seeking out a response to those longings, and then finding ... God in my midst! And that's way more work than just going online and buying gift cards for people. But seriously, how's your Advent going this year? I hope you have truly tried to embrace your deepest longings. And I hope that your longings have driven you far outside your comfort zone searching for answers, or meaning, or whatever it is that you long for.

I realize that for many of us here today, you still can't understand why I'm hung up on embracing our deepest longings. Some of you have told me that you are struggling to connect the idea of longing with Advent. And once again, I want to point out that I'm not making this up. I'm not being creative or original here. Embracing our deepest longings is fundamental to our scripture readings today. So don't blame me! Well, I suppose you can blame me for talking about it. But this fixation on longing is built right into the foundations of Advent.

Take our reading from Isaiah for example, "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted." Do you hear any deep longings in that passage?

Or how about the text from Matthew? "All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; Joseph took Mary as

his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” Do you hear any deep longings in that passage?

As Christians who have heard these passages many times over, I assume you have no trouble hearing deep longings within these texts. But what are those deep longings? On the surface, the longings are for a baby to appear. Which of course ties in nicely with the idea that during Advent we are waiting for the birth of baby Jesus.

However, if these texts are related, as the authors of the lectionary believe them to be, then a baby is not what is longed for. The longing is for something else entirely. In Isaiah, the birth of the baby is only a sign that God will provide the thing that King Ahaz really wants, which is the destruction of his enemies. The baby won't even be the one to destroy Ahaz's enemies. The birth of the baby is simply a sign that God will do the slaughtering God-self, before the baby is old enough to know right from wrong.

Judging by your general body language, I get the sense that this is not the nativity story you were expecting. It is truly amazing how many times we can read the biblical nativity stories and let them wash over us, sing some familiar Christmas carols, and think that Christmas is all about a baby. And that's certainly a feature of the story. But Advent is really all about our deepest longings, which for most of us are not baby-related.

If this is news to you, don't feel too bad about it. Because we have been taught to look for a baby at Christmas. Particularly now. Because the Christian world was rocked on Sept 30, 1952. Does anyone here remember what happened that day?

[slide: Sept. 30 1952.]

On September 30, 1952, the biblical translation that we know as the “Revised Standard Version” was released.

[slide: Sept 30, 1952. RSV Bible]

Here was how one minister reacted to it. “Luther Hux, a pastor in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, announced his intention to burn a copy of the RSV during a sermon on November 30, 1952. This was reported in the press and attracted shocked reactions, as well as a warning from the local fire chief. On the day in question, he delivered a two-hour sermon entitled ‘The National Council Bible, the Master Stroke of Satan - One of the Devil's Greatest Hoaxes’. After the sermon was complete, he led the congregation out

of the church, gave each worshipper a small American flag and proceeded to set light to the pages containing Isaiah 7:14. Hux informed the gathered press that he did not burn the Bible, but simply the ‘fraud’ that the Isaiah pages represented. Hux would later go on to write a tract against the RSV entitled *Modernism's Unholy Bible*.¹ And some people think that Bible study is boring!

I hope you all realize that we just read Isaiah 7:14 here, and we did so without anything catching fire. What on earth was Hux - along with perhaps the majority of all Christians - taking such offence at? Well, it's not even the whole verse in 7:14. It's only 1 word. The word - in Hebrew - “almah”, which in English is ... what all the fighting is about. In the King James Bible, the New International Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and others, almah translates to “virgin”. And in the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, and others, almah translates to “young woman”. The translation called “The Message” is nicely vague on this point, simply declaring in Isaiah 7:14 that “a girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant” which is so uncontroversial that it is controversial.

Why does this matter to us? Prior to around the 1950's, people generally did not read the Bible in a historical, scholarly, critical way. People just read the stories for what they were. In the days when being Christian was the norm, that made a lot of sense. But after the 1950's, there was a growing interest in looking for the historical Jesus, and in understanding the Bible not only as word of God, but also as a form of literature. Who says that God doesn't speak through literature, right? But in 1952 that conversation was derailed almost completely by the argument about whether the word almah meant virgin or simply young woman. I understand that to conservative Christians, and to Catholics, the question of whether or not Mary was a virgin is important, as Hux demonstrates passionately. But still, it distracted us from the other conversations. Which is a pity. Because a better conversation would have been ... what exactly are we waiting for at Christmas? Are we waiting for God to kill our enemies as Isaiah suggests, or are we waiting - or searching - for something else? And what is it that we might be able to find? And I want to try to help us answer that question today in 2 ways.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revised_Standard_Version

Here's the first way. Imagine that you are waiting at a bus stop. In the rain. In the dark. You are cold, damp, hungry, miserable. After waiting for 20 minutes, you finally see the lights of your bus approaching. Your pain is almost over. And just then, a person approaches you and asks you, "who is Jesus?" You are NOT going to miss your bus, so you only have time for a 1 sentence answer. What are you going to say? Are you going to say something about the Old Testament predictions of a messiah? Or are you going to say something about the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth? Or are you going to say something about the eternal presence of the risen Christ in our midst? Given that you only have time for 1 sentence, how many of us feel compelled to mention that Jesus's mother was a virgin - even if you believe that to be true. Does it really matter to the 1 sentence version of "who is Jesus?" whether or not Mary was a virgin?

More to the point - if you can figure out a 1 sentence version of who Jesus is, I think you'll have a better chance of finding Jesus in your midst. So spend some time reflecting on who Jesus is - in 1 sentence - and let that image of Jesus guide you on your search for the divine in your midst.

Well, for some of us, that might sound like a head game. So another way to approach this question is with images. Here are 4 images that help some people find God in their midst.

[slide: sagrada-familia]

Let's start with an easy one. This is the beautiful sanctuary in the Barcelona Cathedral known as "Sagrada-Familia". What could be more natural than looking for Jesus or God in a church? People have been visiting churches as "holy places" for centuries. Churches have been built at vast expense for that very purpose. And frankly, if looking for Jesus in church works for you, then go for it. It's certainly an easy way to find Jesus because you can find churches on google maps. We are open for business, and that's the main business we are open to.

[slide: nature]

Let's take another easy one. Many people have told me that they connect to God better when they are in nature. Perhaps it's because of the grandeur, perhaps it's because being in the wilderness places us face-to-face with our own insignificance. Perhaps it's

because the freedom of being away from social and cultural norms helps us focus on the divine. But certainly, many people have told me they find God more readily in nature.

[slide: homeless person]

So how about this image. I don't know what you see in this picture. Some people might see a pan-handler. But what I see in this picture is opportunity. Opportunity to reach out and help others. Opportunity to make ourselves useful being the hands and feet of God ourselves. Opportunity to live out the social gospel. If helping other people is your way to find God in your midst, that's great. And you can imagine lots of different pictures I could have used here. Perhaps your picture would include visiting people in hospital, or in prison. Perhaps your picture would include feeding others a meal, or volunteering at a food bank. Perhaps your picture would include simply helping people on the street who look lost. Helping others is perhaps the most guaranteed way to find God in your midst.

[slide: daily life]

So how about this image. What do you see? Do you see opportunities to meet God in your midst here? Perhaps I should explain. I just wanted to show an image of a typical crowded street in Toronto. It's just a mish-mash of different people. People rushing to work. People bored out of their minds. Young. Old. People with families. Lonely people. Everybody. Perhaps even you.

[slide: all 4 images]

Of those 4 images, which one is the best? Well, I assume that most of us resonated with one of those images. But if one image didn't work for you, just try another. If you usually look for God in church, try looking for God in nature. If you usually look for God in nature, look for God by reaching out and helping others. If you want a different view, look for God in ordinary, everyday life.

So where should we be looking for Jesus in our midst? Where shouldn't we be looking? Look anywhere you like, because God is everywhere. Look beyond your imagination. You will find Jesus in your midst. Happy Advent!

Amen.