



Always we Begin Again

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given November 27, 2022

First Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 2:1-5

At one point I was with a family that was deciding whether or not to do an intervention for a much beloved uncle who drank too much. Emotion was running high, and they weren't sure how to move forward. The family feared that if they let the cat out of the bag, and confronted their loved one about his drinking, they would never be able to go back to "before". They didn't know how much hurt and anger might come up in that confrontation. They didn't know if their uncle would be able to hear them and get help. They feared that they might lose their uncle if they spoke up. But they also feared they would lose him if they did not. In the end they decided they would never forgive themselves if they did not say something. They had woken up to the truth, both of their love for their uncle, and of his decline, and they decided to launch into uncharted and unwelcome territory, for his sake.

That moment of truth, and the intervention that followed, was a scary beginning that carried the hope of healing and life. In the end this family was willing to embark on such a beginning because they trusted that the power of love and the hope of healing, born from trust in God, could be stronger than the disease of alcoholism, and all the years of hiding, denial, and suffering that went with it. So they courageously stepped forward. As it happened, the uncle listened, and has not had a drink in years since then, and the whole family dynamic changed.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It is the beginning of the liturgical year. It is the Christian New year. But our beginning isn't launched with fanfare and champagne glasses and fireworks and a countdown on Times Square. Our beginning, the season of Advent, is about ferocious hope, and waiting, and longing, and trusting in the promises of God that have not yet come to be. During Advent we live in the in-between time – a time some theologians characterize as the “already and the not yet.” Jesus was born two thousand years ago, but we are still pregnant with the presence of God that has not yet been made completely manifest in our lives. Jesus taught us about nonviolence and speaking truth to power and loving our enemies, but we still yearn for the time when swords will be beaten into ploughshares and the people will not learn war any more.

We need the presence of God to be made flesh among us, to be made manifest in our actual physical lives and not just in the world of ideas and hopes and dreams. We need the love of God to be lived out in our relationships with our spouses and our beloved alcoholic uncles and with our gifted kids who struggle with bullies at school. We need the Word made flesh in our social lives, so that shooters no longer kill innocent people in Walmarts and queer nightclubs, so there is respect and protection between police officers and young black men, and in the polarization in our country between a left and a right that can no longer even begin to understand one another. And once per year, we have four weeks where we dare to sit with our hopes and longings and needs and don't rush to fix them. We dare to lift up our voices to God and ask God for a beginning that is utterly new, and then throw all our weight behind nurturing those beginnings when we spot the sprouts of them.

This season is among the busiest of the year, from a cultural and consumer standpoint. We do more shopping and planning and parties at this time of year than possibly any other. But I would like to invite us all, instead, to a quieter, more contemplative time. I know that the gifts must be bought and the house must be decorated and the parties must be planned and attended. But I wonder, if you allowed yourselves to get quiet and attend to the deeper lives of your spirits, what you might discover you really long for. What new beginning do you need? What beginnings do we need? What beginning is beyond our capacity to enact, like the beginning of recovery that is beyond the capacity of the alcoholic, like the Word made flesh is impossible for us to manufacture? How might we prepare ourselves for the new beginning that we need, but that we can only, in the end, receive as a gift from God?

Like pregnancy, the season of Advent is about preparing to notice and name the new life God is bringing about among us that we cannot control ourselves. What we can do is to become conscious of what God is doing that is utterly new, and cooperate with that life, and receive it as a gift. Sometimes that receiving involves having the courage to stop the frenetic activity and the endless production and the taking care of everyone else, and instead facing the longing of our own hearts. When I was training to become a spiritual director, I had a teacher who was a kind Jesuit priest named Matt Linn. When he was teaching us how to do spiritual direction, he would lean over, look us right in the eyes, and ask us, What do you really want? He didn't mean our surface wants. He meant, deep down, what were the longings in our soul?

He believed that to listen to our deepest longings wasn't about becoming narcissistic or navel-gazing. He believed that God's Spirit can be found in our deepest longings. He believed that the seeds of the new life God wants to bring about among us can be found in those longings. He believed that when we can name our deepest longings and direct them to God in prayer, things previously impossible become possible.

I see beginnings like that happening in our community. I can see people paying attention to what they really want, to their holy discontent, and taking action because of it. Caron Stebinger is a person who can't stand the thought of anyone in our community being hungry. She has never said this to me in words, but you can observe it in her actions. She is helping to lead our First Nations Kitchen ministry which serves food to people in Minneapolis, and was one of the first to volunteer to feed people during the pandemic at Trinity Lutheran church. She has initiated St. John's ministry with the immigrant population of our sister Episcopal church St. Nicholas in Richfield. St. John's has just identified five values that strongly represent the reign of God for us—sacredness, belonging, spiritual nourishment, creativity and transformation—and we are taking action to learn and express these values. We are starting small groups, and cultivating relationships with Good Courage Farm in Hutchinson and CLNE in North Minneapolis. We have participated with other faith communities in exploring and expressing values we hope will guide interactions between police officers and those they are sworn to protect. We are imagining the reign of God, daring to long for that which others might swear is impossible, and then throwing our weight behind the vision that happens when our hearts marry themselves to God's purposes.

We need time to notice and name our holy discontent, and also to notice and name the new life we see God bringing about among us. This Advent, I invite you to have the courage to slow down, not speed up. To do less, and listen more. To carve out time and space to get in touch with the deep longings of your own heart and those of others. In the end, we only have the courage to name our deepest longings when we risk trusting the radical promise of God for a Word made flesh – for love and healing and justice to be made manifest in actual reality, in the real physical worlds we actually inhabit. In Christ, in the power of God’s Spirit, we always begin again.