

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Third Sunday of Advent – December 12, 2021
Zephaniah 3:14-20

Come Holy Spirit and kindle in the hearts of your faithful the fire of your love. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I've been really struggling mentally and emotionally the past few weeks. Over Thanksgiving week, I suffered a significant bout with depression. There's nothing new or surprising about that – I am a chronic depressive and my brain chemistry is such that even with medication I am unable to avoid periodic dips. The clinical depression lifted in about a week and, while the sharp dread of depression has been alleviated, I have found that a general malaise remains. A certain melancholy persists. Is anyone else feeling that, too?

I can't seem to generate the energy or interest for the coming of Christmas this year. My neighborhood's ardent enthusiasm for outdoor holiday lights and decorations fail to bring me joy. Indeed, I find myself grouchy and feeling oppressed by their demanding cheerfulness. My house is one of the few undecorated houses on my street – a lone outpost of darkened trees and undecorated lawn. There is no tantalizing suggestion of cheery decorated surprises within. The boxes and crates of Christmas paraphernalia remain untouched in our attic thus far. It is already the third Sunday of Advent – what is wrong with me?

I suspect I am just exhausted... weary. I am weary from vigilantly keeping myself current with the changing pandemic landscape and ever-shifting risk calculations. I am weary of continually pivoting and innovating through each twist and turn of this never-ending saga. I am weary of being ever alert to signs and symptoms of any kind of illness in myself and my family. I am weary of the responsibility I feel for keeping us all alive and healthy. I am weary..... And in my weariness, I just can't drum up the energy for the holidays. I can't even bother to think through the logistics of who will be coming to stay with us, when, and what we will eat. As we approach the second anniversary of the beginning of the pandemic and move into the third year of pandemic living, I realize that last year I was running on fear and adrenaline, but this year I'm just running on fumes.

Somehow the frightening lessons we've had during Advent have spoken to me in this cheerless place. The dread of judgment and end times actually seems to resonate. Usually, I am anxious to move past them to the hope of the incarnation, refusing to linger too long on their frightening imagery. But not this year. This year, these lessons find me right where I am. I've spent the past week trying to figure out what in the world is wrong with me – why can I not shake loose this malaise? And I've come to the realization that I am actually experiencing the season of Advent, perhaps for the very first time. I realized that this year may be the most Advent-like Advent ever for me. That before, I've given the nod to the silent dark nights of Advent but have actually avoided it altogether, instead living through the season of Advent more as a prelude to Christmas rather than a model of our reality.

The tenor of Advent is one of expectant possibility – as the world eagerly awaits the transformation that will come with the fulfillment of God's promises. In this season, God calls us to quiet watching and listening for what new things He is doing now. We sit and wait, holding our breath with anticipation, straining our ears and eyes for the signs of God's incarnate Word appearing in our midst. But I realize now that I've never really done that before. That always in my Advent experiences I have held tight to the knowledge of God's presence; that I've never allowed myself to let go of that and sit in the experience of absence. This year, I feel I am navigating this strange Advent terrain for the first time – alone and empty and crying out for God's promise of the in-breaking kingdom. ***Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us!***

This is the third Sunday in Advent, which is known as Stir Up Sunday. It is called this because of the words in the collect appointed for the day that we heard at the beginning of our service: “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...” For those who enjoy Anglican trivia, I also note that Stir Up Sunday became associated with the custom of families gathering to mix and steam their Christmas puddings on this day and so the collect served as a useful reminder that it was time to get to work!

In our worship, the collect is meant to gather the intentions of the people and the focus of worship into a succinct prayer for that day. The first two collects of Advent are humbling and a touch frightening (much like our other lessons this season). In them we ask for God’s grace to hear and heed the prophets’ calls to repentance and preparation for the coming of the Lord. The fourth collect of Advent, which we will hear next Sunday, is similar in that we ask for God to purify our consciences in order to make room for the coming Lord. Those three Sundays are fixated on the important immediate work of *metanoia*, or repentance, and on-going preparation for the Lord of our salvation who has come, is coming, and will come again.

This Sunday, however, our collect has a different focus – much like how the candle in the advent wreath is a different color. This Sunday, we pray for God not so much to empower us to repent and prepare, but rather to simply come among and within us. We pray for God’s presence because we realize we need to experience the felt presence and action of God in our lives and in the world around us. Instead of the usual and continual appeal to “help me,” on this Sunday we pray instead, “be with me.”

In previous years, I enjoyed this collect because it always marked our turning the corner as we head into Christmas. This year, however, it has new meaning for me. No longer expressing my expectant and anticipatory exclamation, this year the collect gives voice the mournful plea of my heart as I beseech God: ***Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us!***

Now, my sermon thus far has been fairly bleak. I’ve given voice to the mournful cries of my heart not to provoke sympathy, but rather to offer company and empathy to any of you who may be feeling something similar. I’m not trying to be a Debbie Downer but rather to provide communion, support, but more importantly hope. For while we wait in Advent for God’s work of transformation and his in-breaking kingdom, we do not wait alone, nor do we wait without hope. Even as we beseech God to come among us, our lament is also proof of our faith and hope that God will do just that. In addition to being known as Stir Up Sunday, this third Sunday of Advent is also called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is ecclesiastical Latin and it means “rejoice.” The season of Advent originally started as a season of fasting in preparation for Christmas and Gaudete Sunday offered a break in this fasting for rejoicing in the nearness of the Lord’s coming. Pope Francis calls this Sunday the “Sunday of Joy”, and this special focus is often symbolized with a rose-colored candle in the Advent wreath.

Our lessons today from prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah exclaim the joy and delight we are to experience not only at the fulfillment of God’s promises but even now in this time of quiet waiting. And let me tell you, I doubt I have ever needed to hear these lessons as much as this year. I even found myself reading them out loud – they seem to compel proclamation! As Episcopal priest and author Lauren Winner writes, “No longer are we praying to escape judgment – now we are singing with gladness because, per Zephaniah, “The Lord has taken away the judgments” against us. Now, per Isaiah, we are drawing water from the wells of salvation, trusting God and spurning fear; we are shouting and singing for joy... We do not fear – precisely because the Lord is near.”¹

As we wait anxiously in this Advent darkness, we should not despair. For the faint flickers of candlelight may be seen on the horizon and is indeed growing brighter. Our waiting will not be in

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/december-13-third-sunday-advent-zephaniah-314-20-isaiah-122-6-philippians-44-7-luke-37-18>

vain for God fulfills his promise of salvation. We may feel alone and frightened, but if we can release our hold on fear and instead listen deeply into the silent night, we may begin to discern the notes of the distant symphony of God's loving presence coming closer. The Light of the World is ready to break thorough our darkness and fill our lives with love. ***Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us!***

So, with fear and trembling, I continue to wait in the uncomfortable Advent darkness, all the while holding tight to the hope of God's promise as spoken through the words of the Prophet Zephaniah, *"Do not fear, O Zion. The Lord, your God, is in your midst...he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love."*

May it be so. Amen.