

“When It’s Time to Pull Up the Roots”

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11-29-20 First Sunday of Advent-

Based upon Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Welcome to Advent– the season of expectation, anticipation... and waiting! We are waiting to celebrate once again the birth of Jesus, but also the transformation of our lives and the world into all of God’s good purposes. In the Advent season, hope is being born in us, and we are waiting for its arrival. Advent reflects the unfinished business of creation as we travel closer to God’s plans for the world.

We wait! So, about waiting.... I received a call this week from a colleague who serves a church in California. He gave me permission to tell this story. After the initial greetings, the “hellos” and “how are yous,” he said, “Well it happened! I had a meltdown at our clergy sermon preparation group this week.” “Can’t wait to hear,” I said. He said, “Well, the usual. There we sat, Advent once again, knowing that we would be focusing on expectation, anticipation... waiting. ‘So, what’s everyone thinking for the sermon this Sunday?’ someone asked.”

My friend responded with a quick, strong, defiant and knowing him, quite dramatic answer. “Waiting!!!????” he said. “Aren’t we sick and tired of waiting. I am!! I am exhausted from waiting for people to stop dying; waiting for a vaccine; waiting to return to church (and when we do, I plan to spend the entire afternoon at coffee hour talking to people); waiting for school to be normal for our kids; waiting to be able to sit and pray by someone’s bedside; waiting to be able to plan and attend family gatherings; waiting to go a baseball game. I am sick and tired of waiting!”

Then he said. “And you know what else I told this group. I told them that I have always been the person to criticize stores for putting out Christmas decorations so early. I was an Advent zealot insisting that we only sing Advent hymns until Christmas Eve. But not this year, I say bring it on. This first Sunday of Advent, we’re singing ‘Joy to the World,’ and next week ‘Silent Night,’ and ‘O Come All Ye Faithful.’ I am waiting weary. Bah Humbug to waiting.”

I don’t think he’s the only one judging from all the Christmas lights that went up in my neighborhood before Thanksgiving. Hmm! Well, all of the scripture passages for this Sunday, even the two we did not read, refer to waiting. The prophet Isaiah writes that the people have waited so long for God to act that they wonder if God has abandoned them, if God has thrown up God’s hands and walked away. “Just how long do we have to wait for you, God?” The Psalmist writes, “Come... save us. Restore us! Let your face shine upon us.” Please! We are waiting.”

Paul’s Letter to the Church at Corinth says that God has given all that we need during this time of... waiting. And in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples, “We don’t know about the exact time that the Son of Man will return. Only God knows. We just have to wait and, in the meantime, keep awake, keep alert, continue God’s work. Be patient! Be diligent! Wait!” Does anyone else feel like they need to have a waiting meltdown?

The Reverend Bruce Epperly writes that this is the reality of the first Sunday of Advent in the year 2020:

“Jesus came to earth, healed the sick, shared the vision of peace, died on the cross and rose again and yet his ministry is unfinished. The world that Jesus was born into still reflects the ambiguity of beauty and brokenness, salvation and sickness. Jesus has come and we are still waiting in 2020. The Prince of Peace has come, but the systemic reality of polarization, alienation, individualism, racism, and violence is still perpetrated.”

Let’s take a minute to get to some “nitty gritty” about what is meant when we use the word “systemic” because we hear it a lot these days. I return to my nursing background (as I often do) as we used the word “systemic” when some disease process impacted a person’s entire bodily system. Maybe the problem originated in the heart, but it soon impacted the functioning of the lungs, the kidneys, the liver, the circulation; the entire system. It became systemic. Systemic is when the entire whole is impacted; the whole body, the whole community, the whole society, the whole nation. There is no saying, “That doesn’t have anything to do with me.” The whole society is impacted.

When things such as hatred, anger, resentment, denial of history (the list goes on) ..., when these things lay down roots in our lives, these roots will go rogue; they will overpower and override and take control of our very identities. In a society and in our personal lives these are roots that need to be dug up and hauled away because their impact becomes systemic. The Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Nadia Bolz Webber offered this prayer just a few months ago.

“God of all beings. My fear is turning to anger and I am afraid that my anger can so easily turn to hate (It will lay down its roots and spread boundlessly). I mean hate is the thing I say I am against. Turn me away from hate, Lord. My heart can’t take that kind of bitterness. Remind me that my heart is already spoken for. You have made it to give and receive love.”

Rodney Sadler, a professor of Bible and director of the Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation at Union Presbyterian Seminary in North Carolina, tells a story about his rogue rose bush. He writes:

“Several years ago I planted a rose bush in my front yard next to my mailbox. My desire was that it grow into a beautiful bush that would surround the area with a colorful array of blossoms and delightful scents. Well, the bush grew, all right, and there was the occasional bloom. But what it grew persistently was thorns. I would get messages in my mailbox from the mail carriers saying, “I was attacked today by your rose bush.” The rose bush became famous to the neighborhood children who warned others that when they had to curb their bikes, they should stay away from my front yard in order to avoid injury. Understanding these concerns and recognizing that what I had hoped would become a beautiful bush had actually become a community annoyance, a big one, I decided to cut it down. The neighborhood was a much happier place for a time. But, by the next spring, the bush had grown back. So I cut it down again, but each time it would grow back thornier and more widespread than ever. It had gone rogue and I realized that I could not just cut down the bush, I had to eliminate the root and haul it away.”

In our common response to issues and problems that are systemic, we tend to address the bush, the visible symptoms. Far too infrequently do we note the truth. We can cut down that bush many times, but if we don't address the root, the problems will continue to impact us and all those around us. Advent and the coming of Christ into the world again and again and again calls us to more than just minor adjustments and tweaking some behaviors. There are roots within our society and within our culture which have gone rogue and must be dug up and hauled away and it will take longer than the four weeks of Advent. These rogue roots become obstacles that keep us from the experiences that Christ brought into the world and that God intends for all of us to have.

I can hear you now, saying, "Look, Dottie, these are systemic, big problems. What difference can one individual possibly make?" Digging up the roots to systemic problems is big and overwhelming, takes time, and may move forward slowly. But it needs to be intentionally done, one person, one community at a time. **And it is past time.**

Digging up and hauling away the roots is more than a tweaking of some behaviors, it's more than doing the right things when our hearts and our lives are not really aligned with our actions. The good works might be what's visible, but what is ruling the heart? However, the kind transformation that makes one realize that there are rogue roots of ruin ruling their hearts and their lives might just begin with some practices, behaviors, commitments, and reflection of how these behaviors must come to align with what God has written on our hearts. This kind of transformation might begin:

- With one person committing to intentional study or participation in a group that re-examines some of the history of our country where blind eyes were turned to blatant injustices. It doesn't take away or negate what is good. But it does make us face what is wrong and should not be repeated.
- With one person who decides that they are going to move out of their comfort zone so they can listen and hear the stories vastly different from their own experience.
- With one person who is determined to show up twice a week because a second grader looks forward to reading with them.
- With one person who sits and listens to young people and what they think.
- With one person who sits and listens to old people and what they think.
- With one person who commits to getting food to people because everyone should have food security.
- With one person who realizes that something in their life is just not right. There are rogue roots in their life that need digging up and hauling away because these are the roots keeping them from the experiences God wants them to have and to know.

Welcome to Advent! No meltdowns please! It is a season of waiting and what are we waiting for? We are waiting;

- To become our deepest, truest selves.
- To live in a nation committed to the journey of liberty and justice for all and to show that to the whole world.

- To live in a world with siblings from many places, of many colors, with many stories as important as our own.
- To learn and to grow and to work and to keep alert and awake to all of God's surprises.
- To birth once again hope and make sure that message infuses our system.
- To live with roots of love rather than fear.

The season of Advent is not a time to wait for a divine rescue mission that will whirl us away from this messy place. It is in this messy place where God's divine goodness, grace, and hope will unfold and it is with roots of love, justice, and righteousness where beautiful blossoms of life will overrule any thorns that try to take over. The message of Advent is the big "Yes, God's will and God's ways WILL come and all things will be rooted in LOVE!" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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