

The Adventures of Advent
Rev. Hannah Petrie
December 4, 2016

PRAYER

Inspired by Tom Owen-Towle

To the Saints of solitude, patience, and compassion, we pray:
Let us take the time we need to brood.

Let us be brave and wrestle with the silence and darkness within.

What is waiting to be born? What courage is needed?

Let us travel beneath the cheap glare of the season and dive deeply into our quietude – that we may emerge as more expansive people.

May we assert that our emotional tenor need not be monotone this time of year – that we brood for good reason – for the brokenness in our lives and that of the larger world.

We brood for what we plan to do with the remaining years of our lives, starting here and now. That we brood not to despair,

but that we may cleanse and ground our being, readying our hearts for a soulful, embodied response,

that greater light may return to our days and to our lives. AMEN.

SERMON

Okay, true confessions. I am one of those annoying people who love Christmas. I love the tinsel, the lights, the shopping, the elfing, the decorating, the food, the eggnog. I get that Christmas, at heart, is about joy – joy that we're alive, and not merely living, but thriving in the gifts of abundance in life that we give, take, and share. Joy that the light comes back after the Winter Solstice. Without the light, without the water, the earth, the air, we couldn't live. And so, we are grateful, and joyful.

So there is that – I'm a Book of Luke kind of gal, I like the pageantry. But it doesn't mean I don't appreciate the other aspects, and hold them even more sacred in my heart. For many, the Christmas season is a dark time, a sad time. A time when a death occurred in the past, or a divorce, a job loss. For many, the season is a time of sadness and anxiety. At best, it can only be experienced in Buddhist Thich Nhat

Hahn's words, "Sorrowful joy, or joyful sadness." Meaning that, while there may be brief moments of joy, there is an underlying backdrop of sadness and grief. Being thankful for our lives can only be bitter-sweet.

All of us, I'm sure, can remember a lousy Christmas. With all the expectations of ecstasy our culture insists Christmas is merely about, there can be disappointment. But often, it is a good thing to wait with our sadness. That's what Advent is mostly about – this waiting. It's what life is often about, as John Lennon so aptly states in his song, *Beautiful Boy*, "life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans." When we wait with our sadness, or our anxiety, or any other unpleasant emotion, we allow it a chance to pass through. We process some back-logged grief. We may even experience a moment of grace, when we gain insight, and are able to let go. So I also treasure the moments of silence in the season: the elusive moments of peace amongst our noisy, typical days.

And then there are the moments of connection and service. Remembering those less fortunate than we – the true meaning of Jesus' birth, the joy that a prophet arrived, who would effectively teach the meaning of life, that at the heart of it all, we find peace and contentment in the giving of ourselves – not the things we buy as presents – but actually giving ourselves – our presence, our listening and seeing heart.

Despite all this, there remains general confusion over the merits of the Christmas season. In other words, a lot of us have mixed feelings about Christmas – as religious liberals, are we supposed to like Christmas, or are we supposed to feel disdainful of its exceptionalism, and its origin of false pretenses? About the fact that no one really knows when Jesus was born and this date was chosen to co-opt and diminish the pagan solstice celebrations that preceded it? Heck, no one knows for sure Jesus even existed, and with a little digging around, one could conclude he was a composite of the savior stories of several other times and places.

Okay, but - where does being a Grinch about the power of story and myth get us? Doesn't sound like much fun. What I'm suggesting is that, no matter how you feel about Christmas, let's acknowledge that we as human beings *need* authentic sources of joy in our lives – especially at the darkest time of the year, which makes it a type of salvation. *Don't stay in your head with the sacred matters of life, or you might miss out.* The joy available to us this time of year is about softening our hearts, making them permeable enough that we are vulnerable – vulnerable to that joyful sorrow, that sorrowful joy.

Because I grew up UU, I have no idea what Emmanuel is. In that carol, I'm like, "I know who Jesus is, but who's Emmanuel?" Emmanuel, I learned from reading Tom Owen-Towle's book, means "God with us." That was the good news symbolized in the story of Jesus's life and teachings, the knowledge that the realm of God dwells in the midst of us, right where we live, not behind, or beyond, or above us. Owen-Towle writes, "From Christmas day forward, we should acknowledge, in our

innermost beings that the Eternal is present in everyday events and emotions, not just in the extraordinary ones.”

While that word, “Eternal,” which he capitalized, kind of makes me cringe, I’m interested in its challenge to myself, and to all of us. If this truth of goodness and joy is accessible to all people of all times, if it’s really *eternal*, how do we make it accessible to us now? In a way that transforms our lives?

That, my friends, is the good news and the bad news today. The good news is that it’s there, for anyone, waiting for us to realize its promise. The bad news? For religious liberals – especially perhaps - this involves some work. Because we don’t just hand it to you in the outdated form of the gospels. Don’t get me wrong - the timeless wisdom of authentic joy is contained therein, but for many, that version of the Christ figure that the gospels illuminate no longer resonates.

What I’m suggesting is that we each have to decide for ourselves the most meaningful way we can access God. God defined as our highest, most noble aspirations. If you don’t embrace the journey as worthwhile and unique to your life, if we don’t devote ourselves to that journey, then it’s harder to reach a destination of greater wisdom and authentic happiness and joy.

The function of devotion is that we are stating our intentions for ourselves, of who we want to be, of those qualities most worthy of us – but, and this is really we key, *we have to reach out for it* – in some way, we have to embody the opening of our hearts. That, as religious liberals, is how we believe we save ourselves: by our own initiative. We define the terms of salvation that are meaningful to us and actively seek our own sources of inspiration. We recognize that authentic joy comes from our salvation. By our own actions, we are saved from our fear, our frozenness, our isolation. Whatever it takes to get us closer to right relationship – with ourselves and with each other – those are our patron saints.

So which modern interpretation of Jesus might make you boogie? What’s your ballad of “Boogie Christ”? The historical facts are not crucial - *what matters is embracing your own transformation*. What modern version of Christ could be worth your devotion? The best line of *The Ballad of Boogie Christ* (by Joseph Arthur) is the end of the song:

*Christ would be savage, but Christ would be true
He’d say if you want him, then look inside you.*

The message from the Owen-Towle book (“Unwrapping the Inner Gifts of Christmas”) that we don’t feel just one emotion between Thanksgiving and Christmas seems like an obvious revelation, but it’s one I hadn’t heard put quite that way. For my part, I have the tendency to overemphasize joy around the holidays, at the exclusion of quiet reflection. It could be that I’m trying to avoid sorrow, with the fear that it might turn into depression. But this message made me realize, I don’t

have to be afraid. I can spend some time being quiet, even thinking about the things that bring sorrow, and I won't get stuck there – the kaleidoscope of different emotions turning will save me from that.

Towle's chapter on waiting touched me, especially the last paragraph, which I didn't read before. He wrote:

“Down deep in the marrow of our souls, we know that ours is still a waiting world, and that you and I must become eternal waiters. For no matter what verities we attain, love we perform, excellence we achieve, we'll end our lives somewhere in the middle as partial beings – waiting, waiting, waiting...”

Some of my quiet reflection has gone something like this. We live in a society where you're supposed to achieve, and I feel fortunate and thankful for all that my husband and I have achieved. We waited to find each other, we waited through our training for our professional fields, we waited to have kids, and now we enjoy those professions and our wonderful children. But I know growing older has been difficult for some of my fellow co-horts of Generation X. It's simply not as easy to achieve as it once was – they've waited for those markers of success, the job, the house, the family – and they haven't come. It makes me sad.

As you know, it's not just Generation X that suffers from this endless waiting. I hear all the time, oh, the economy's getting better. And I think, well, not for everyone, there's still a lot of hurt out there. Probably everyone here today knows someone who's still struggling, or it well could be yourself. A lot of us are still waiting.

I want to lift up the story of someone specific, who I've been thinking about a lot, lately – my dear friend Blake. I've known Blake over 20 years because I met him in college. When he was 24 years old, he fell off his roof at a housewarming party he was throwing for himself, and has been paraplegic ever since. Like for many of us, one of Blake's most authentic sources of joy was his sexuality – he identifies as bi-sexual. The injury was high enough on his spinal cord that he lost that. Except – years later, he discovered he could access some sexual feeling through the use of methamphetamines. About six years ago, when I moved to the LA area, Blake was living in a crummy apartment in Beverly Hills, a full-blown crystal meth addict.

I remember I was 8 months pregnant in August, 2009, when my friend Kate flew from Minneapolis to do an intervention for Blake. He had lost his job, his apartment – we were determined to slap some sense into him. It was just the three of us, Blake, Kate, and me. I remember my ankles were so swollen I had to lay down on his motel bed to make my speech. I remember some of the horrible things I had to say to him – like how meth was making him stupid, that he wasn't as smart as he used to be. Anything, to get him to wake up.

I didn't hear from him for well over a year after that. He did eventually return to his hometown in Illinois, where his parents live, and created a new life. He went back to

school and became a certified paralegal, and now works at a civil rights firm in Chicago. Remember the video in Chicago that came out of a police officer shooting a man 17 times in the back? Blake was the first to view that video outside the police department.

But, you see, in today's economy, people still get paid really crappily, and he struggles financially. And I think: after all he's gone through and overcome, why does he still have to *wait*? Why has he not quite yet found his place in the world?

As Towle says, ours is a waiting world, and this waiting is often a source of sorrow and frustration. Think of all we're still waiting for as a society. As a parent, it's excruciating sometimes, to think of the ways we have to wait for the world to be as it should for our kids. A world where schools are safe, and nothing like Newtown could happen. A world where they can focus more on their development as human beings, rather than their capacity to compete. A world where balance and sustainability are in full swing, not just vaguely understood as necessities for future generations.

Oh, we wait. It's for people like Blake that I feel sorrowful joy, or joyful sorrow. I'm both happy and sad for him. For whom in your life do you feel both happy and sad?

This is the time of year when we can surrender to the constant paradox of life. That we're grateful for our blessings, yet mad and sad that the world is not yet as it should be. After the election we're still trying to swallow, this paradox could not be felt more keenly. It's all mixed up: the joy, the dread, the silence, the sorrow, and the need for salvation - to embody the world we envision.

So reach out and reach in. Celebrate, *and* mourn. Give to others, *and* give to yourself. Be anxious *and* discard worry in gratitude of abundance. Experience childlike joy *and* visit the pits of despair and grief. If life is often waiting, and wait we must, then make that waiting productive. Open the floodgates of your heart, that your cup of sorrow may also be filled with joy, going back and forth, back and forth, between joyful sorrow, and sorrowful joy.

Happy Advent. And now, let us rise in body or spirit to sing hymn number #226
People Look East . . .