

Blessed be God who animates our lives and offers us vision of the Peaceable Kingdom and the means to become that Kingdom's co creators. AMEN

We talk a lot about the Paschal Mystery at Easter... the Mystery of Resurrection and The mystery that we too might participate in that love of God made manifest. We talk less about mystery at Christmas perhaps because we tend to think that Christ's birth is a certainty. What we might fail to comprehend is that Christ's birth is but a beginning ...again...of the timeless reverberating cycle which signals not only the Incarnation but the inbetween time in which we live waiting for Christ to come again when all things will be gathered into that sacred eternal union of which Isaiah prophecies.

Thomas Merton said: The Advent mystery is the beginning of the end of all in us not yet Christ." Not yet, and still is...we reside in this mysterious liminal space and particularly in Advent we struggle with the we want it now mentality. Not yet, and still is however causes us to pause at least theologically, if not psychologically, and consider what does Christ came, lives and will come again have to do with the ultimate vision which Isaiah offers, a vision of peace, gentleness, and union.

It is all quite strange, bizarre, difficult to grasp...and yet strangeness may be exactly what we should consider this day!

Recently Toni Morrison the renowned author and visionary was memorialized at a service at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in NYC. She was eulogized by such dignitaries as Oprah Winfrey. Her writings like Song of Solomon, Beloved, Paradise, Home etc... are not only eloquent and imaginative but reveal the deeply devoted follower of Christ which the author was. They also testify to the history of the African American, particularly the faith and love and joy in the face of torture, slavery, rape and pillage. They read like the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures overlaid by the living Christ in our midst. And they are quite bizarre in places, with imaginative images real and unreal.

As one religious commentator wrote about Morrison and her work: there is a strangeness to it, not unlike the strangeness we encounter in Advent.

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To that I would add There is hope not unlike Christmas. There is redemption and release not unlike Easter. The strangeness is apocalyptic not unlike Revelation!

To these observations I would also add strangeness and by that I mean radical strangeness is particularly in high relief this second Sunday of Advent and particularly disconcerting as we pray the collect and light a candle to peace. Strangeness and peace are difficult to reconcile not to mention to put into the same sentence.

Our lectionary is bookended by Isaiah and John the Baptist, both prophets, but of very different behaviors and manners. On the one hand we hear the familiar but never heard enough passage of God's holy mountain where peace which passes understanding is the norm. Wolves and lambs, lions and kids, valleys made high and mountains made low, stange bizarre yes...ultimate peaceful and peaceable kingdom...one can only hope.

On the other hand after this lullaby by the prophet Isiaah, the stillness is broken by the one crying out, crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord...it is no less strange in the context of camel hair and locusts... it is no less Bizarre when one asks oneself would any of us respond to someone yelling at us to repent! You brood of vipers! AND would any of us think that peace was on the other side of John's confrontation? One can at least say that this is a penetrating message, in the style of Jonathan Edwards the puritanical preacher.

Again tho...how to we get to peace? advent is exactly about these contrasting states and the ironies of faith: light in darkness, stillness in noise, peace within chaos.

In order to trace this advent invitation to peace through Isaiah into Matthew's gospel we need to leave our heads and enter our hearts...we need to engage our imaginations buoyed by the likes of Toni Morrison and inspired by the ultimate of incomprehensible sacred realities, the Holy Spirit. We need our contemplative souls.

I wonder if Isaiah is more like a travel brochure presenting us with the vision which inspires us, even compels us to journey, and John the agent telling us how to book the flight and get to this exotic longed for place. Imagine this incredible

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peaceful holy mountain; imagine baptism by water and the holy spirit guiding us there...after all that is the Christian journey.

Advent is the season to be still with salvation history and rest with, even lean into, inconsistency and bizarreness. To be gentle as the baby Jesus is gentle as the mother Mary is gentle, as Joseph and the animals and the wolf and the lamb to be are gentle.

How do we reconcile all this? Well, it may seem even more strange but I am aided by the word root...advent surrounds and springs from a root...Jesse's tree certainly...but more importantly the root of all salvation...God, Father Son and Holy Spirit.

And root, lest we trip on it and avoid it, is the key to radical; the word radical is derived from the Latin *radix* meaning something so fundamental so basic as to be transformatively new...I come to make all things new...God comes in the form of humility, rootedness, radical love incarnate...there is nothing normal about this and yet it is fundamental to our faith, fundamental to our hope, fundamental to peace. It is strange, it is disarming and it is radical.

That which is radical is also difficult to forget and memory is central to our faith...

Isaiah's vision is radical; John's cry is radical; prophecy is radical
Toni Morrison and her images of reconciliation are radical
Radical strangeness is all over advent...we cannot get to the truth without it
We cannot get to the manger a radical scene in itself not to mention the holy mountain without passing through radical strangeness, radical wilderness

We can only get there by entering the strange stories: of Mary being visited by an angel and responding to the most radical of pregnancies; of Shepherds deciding to follow a star, not just any star but the holy star, the radical guidepost star; of A crazed John the Baptist calling us to repent and be baptized in a radically new way by the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit! Radical baptism!

Let us use our imaginations to hear John the Baptist's cry not so much as demand and hostile and threatening for we know we humans don't do well with that! But to put ourselves in his place and try on the radical desperation which has come

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upon him by the Holy Spirit and to lean into the radical strangeness of it all.
Imagine all this is less demand than holy invitation! Albeit bizarre!

We are invited to enter into that liminal numinous space of the peace of strangeness or in the poet's words the peace of wild things.

Advent is a time to give up our need for security and consistency.. to give it up to God and allow the radical strangeness of the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts in such a way that we too, like Mary, like the shepherds, like the Baptizer, arrive at the manger awaiting yet another coming in glory, and know peace. We will have arrived there as if for the first time having traveled through wildly bizarre wilderness times; we will have arrived at the humble holy mountain made low in a stable and gently give thanks for peace and good will made possible for all.

We will soon hear and sing peace on earth good will toward all whom God favors. To live into that favor we are called to radically prepare, to radically repent, to radically remember that we might be transported to a radically transformed community of love and of PEACE.