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“Charlie Brown: Searching for Meaning”

December 2, 2018

A Charlie Brown Advent series – Advent – Holy Communion & Baptism

It may seem strange to connect Charlie Brown and the prophet Elijah, but we can learn from both of them and their search. As we begin this season of Advent, we might be thinking about traditions.

There are some traditions that just stick. Every December, I'd wait for my favorite Christmas specials to come on TV. It was a part of the preparation and knowing that, soon enough, Christmas would be here. And my sense of “getting ready” wasn't so much waiting for the time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, though I loved Christmas Eve worship and getting up on Christmas morning. It was the excitement of gifts.

It was 1965 when “A Charlie Brown Christmas” first aired. Now it's a staple of holiday broadcasting, but when it was created, there wasn't a lot of hope for it. It was put together in six months for Coca-Cola, and network executives didn't think it would do well - partly because of its overtly religious message. They were surprised when millions of people - almost half of American televisions - tuned in to watch “good 'ole Charlie Brown” navigate his feelings of “blah” around Christmas, even the commercialism of it all. “I just don't understand Christmas, I guess...” and a TV special was born.

The activities around Christmas aren't enough to offer meaning for Charlie Brown. And he's meant to feel alone in his struggle, at least according to Linus and Lucy, though I don't think he is. Perhaps that's why these 30 minutes of television have staying power - because Charlie Brown (and the rest of the Peanuts gang) reflects our own feelings about this time of year.

Peanuts creator Charles Schulz was clear about his message: “Our theme is Charlie Brown's search for the true meaning of Christmas - a search that...is one we're all engaged in.” There are traditions we love, but that's not enough to sustain us. What are we searching for, and how do we focus on the true meaning of this season?

First, we have to acknowledge where we are. Maybe you're excited for all that's ahead - or maybe not. Perhaps you look forward to all of the gatherings and gifts and glee, or perhaps you're already dreading it. You may even be the one who'll be glad when it's all over! I wonder if a part of the blessing of Charlie Brown is that he's willing to confess his feelings - and even share them with his friends.

There's something to be said for honesty - before God and with each other. So many times we put on a facade in this season because we're told that it's supposed to be "the most wonderful time of the year." But we know that it's just not sometimes - for many reasons.

Whether it's overspending to try to keep up with expectations, trying to do too much with too many people on too little time with a calendar that's already too full, attempting to find the perfect tree or gift or recipe (and maybe even have a Pinterest fail or two!), crafting a perfect experience for our kids, or struggling with loss that is so apparent, it's tough.

And it's easy to try to ignore it and keep going without telling the truth. But I have some Good News today. This is the beginning of a new Christian year - a new church year - Advent. Advent is really a time for the searcher and seeker. I had to search through our Christmas boxes for this Charlie Brown nativity set. But Advent calls us to a different kind of search.

We're not searching for Jesus because he already came, lived, died, and rose again. We're anticipating the celebration of his birth and what it means that God chooses to come among us - Emmanuel - God with us. We're searching for a deeper sense of God's presence and seeking to remind ourselves what this season is all about - not simply that "Jesus is the reason for the season," but that we have to seek him and open our hearts to what God is doing. Someone said as we planned this series, "How are we going to reel this back in?" How will we claim the hope, peace, joy, and love that God offers us - and share it with others?

It might seem strange that we're going back to Elijah today, but he has some interesting connections with Charlie Brown. Both of them are searching for meaning. Elijah was a prophet who lived 1,000 years before Christ. When we meet him at Mount Horeb, he's just coming off a victory against those who were worshipping other gods - including Baal. He's on the run - alone, by himself, and wondering what's next for him. His victory isn't enough to sustain him.

We know the importance of mountains as a place to meet God. Moses received the Ten Commandments on the mountain. Jesus took a few disciples up to the mountaintop for an amazing vision. Even now, we know that people take spiritual pilgrimages to the mountains as a way to grow closer to God.

Elijah is a bit more desperate; he runs away from Jezebel and Ahab. He's had enough, even after seeing God do amazing things. Is he trying to avoid his call to be a prophet of God, or is he trying to figure out where God will lead him next?

Either way, God provides and leads Elijah into the wilderness. God speaks to Elijah and asks him what he wants. Elijah lays it out honestly - he's been faithful, but some of the Israelites haven't, and now he's fearful for his life.

Are we willing to share our feelings with God? Are we willing to be honest with God? And if we're honest with God, are we also willing to listen so that God can be honest with us? Perhaps God has a word for us. We get a powerful word from Elijah's experience of God. God doesn't respond directly to Elijah, but invites him to come out and meet God on the side of the mountain.

Perhaps we think that God speaks with might and power - a mighty wind, a thundering roll, a roaring fire. Elijah had every right to think that God might speak that way because God had shown up that way before. And, friends, it's difficult to imagine that God speaks exclusively that way as we see the remnants of natural disasters right now - the wind of tornadoes, an earthquake that shakes our foundations, and the heat of fire that has destroyed so much. Perhaps what we can take from Elijah's experience is that God isn't found in these spectacular displays.

The Hebrew translation can be "a gentle whisper," "a gentle breeze," "a still, small voice," and even "the sound of sheer silence." That's how God speaks to Elijah - in the most unassuming, unspectacular way. And God directs him back to be a spiritual leader and mentor to Elisha.

Advent is about searching and seeking in a season when we see the power of light to dispel darkness. The smallest glimmer can change the view. No one figured that God would come in the most humble way, but God did. No one figured that the meaning and message of God's great love could be found in a tiny child born to humble parents, but that's where we find true hope, peace, joy, and love.

Like Charlie Brown, Elijah expresses his need honesty and starts on a search for meaning. And God speaks to him clearly. I hope that we'll start on a search, too. It's not that God is not with us, but my sense is that all of us could use some time in quiet to both speak our hearts to God - and to listen to God - to get quiet enough that we might hear something new in a "gentle whisper."

Elijah prayed, and I hope that we might pray, too. Today we have an opportunity to start journaling our prayers. If you already write down your prayers, I hope you continue. This practice may be new for you, but I hope you'll engage it.

You have a journal of your very own - nothing that you need to share with anyone else. You can also use an app on your phone or your tablet. The invitation is to write your prayers and take time to be with God - to speak and to listen. We also have some prompts if you need ideas.

Elijah stays in relationship with God even when he's wondering what's next. Charlie Brown is a good model because he perseveres. His search goes on. He goes along with the suggestions of his friends to try something new like the Christmas play. He goes against the crowd when he picks the smallest, shabbiest tree in the lot. And we know how it turns out.

We won't find God in the flashy or obvious stuff of this season. That doesn't mean that we can't see something sacred in them, but it's not where God is apt to show up most clearly. In the chaos and hectic pace of this season, we must set aside time to focus on sitting in God's stillness, sensing God's guidance, and settling into God's presence. I was struck by the truth from writer Melissa Spoelstra, "God doesn't work according to the microwave mentality (not the hot pot either!); God is more into the crock pot."

Jesus calls us to seek first God's Kingdom. We have to seek God. God is there, to be sure, but we have to seek and search, too. We celebrate God's grace in our lives today as we celebrate it for young Bryce, and yet we know it takes the care and nurture of his parents and family and a faith community for him to know the fullness of God's love. We celebrate God's grace as we come to the table with open, honest hearts, and God hears us. Let's open our hearts to God in prayer as we prepare to come to the table...

PRAYER OF CONFESSION