

“Making Room (Hope)”

November 28, 2021

The Inn: Housing the Holy series

Waiting, watching, and hoping. Maybe you’ve noticed that Advent begins as daylight decreases. It feels like it’s 10:00 p.m. when it’s only 4:00 p.m.! As the days are getting shorter and things are changing, this season of preparation comes. It’s meant for us to look back and remember the power of the Incarnation. It’s meant for us to look forward to the coming of Christ - not in fear, but with hope for the fullness of God’s reign to come. But even more, it’s a time when we can look around and see what should be different.

When Advent was first introduced in the 4th century, it was a season of fasting and a time of preparation for baptism – similar to our Lenten season. Can you imagine fasting right now? Can you imagine us doing less and eating less? Put the baked goods away! Can you imagine waiting for Christmas with time for peace and reflection rather than filling up the days? Advent is a time to wait – it’s true – but we can’t be passive. We work on making room for Jesus to dwell in us.

Consider what it means to make room for someone. If you host family or friends in your home, you have to prepare the space - get out clean sheets and towels, make sure you have food ready, and all the rest. Last Sunday, Bishop Bard came to our house for lunch, so the day before we were making room. And when I took him back to our home, everything was ready, so a public thanks to my family.

If you host someone, you have to make room. Some of us have hosted people in our homes for an extended time - family moving home, exchange students, or helping people in need. It requires time invested and a change in routine, and sometimes it’s hard. Making room can be hard, especially when we have so much crowding our lives.

Advent is a time for us to prepare, which can require some changes - to prepare our hearts - to open ourselves - to the miracle of God coming to be with us in our humanity and to the promise that God will come again in Christ and make things right. Justice, righteousness, peace - the ultimate gifts of God’s full reign - will come even as we live each day wondering how it’s all going to go. And we have a part in bringing that Kingdom now.

If we listen to Jeremiah, we get this short snippet that comes after chapters of doom and gloom - and a lot of judgment. Jeremiah is a prophet, and prophets don’t always bring the most welcome news. Many times, they are the social critics who offer judgment from God. They’re not everyone’s favorite because they tell us what’s wrong - and call us to make it right. And Jeremiah has been doing that - telling the people to

come back to God, to stop cheating on God, to get away from the social injustice that's running rampant and then to treat the most vulnerable well - all of it coming from the Law that God gave through Moses to the people.

Prophets like Jeremiah are the ones who see what's happening and are led by God to say, "Some of what we're doing is wrong. It's exclusive, not inclusive. You're hurting people and not helping them." Perhaps it's not too difficult to be convicted today. We live in a world where some people take everything, and some go without. We live in a world where some people build bigger barns (or buy more storage space to store more stuff), and other people don't have houses. Prophets are always calling us to make changes so that we share more equitably and give more freely - as a directive from God who calls us to care for one another.

And Israel has heard this message from Jeremiah all along. Even though he was a reluctant prophet at the beginning, Jeremiah rose to the challenge of prophetic work. But Jeremiah offers this word of hope and consolation to a community in need of help and hope. Even after a promised exile of 70 years - that's the judgment - they will return home. God will raise up the Messiah. God will forgive them and restore them. So hope even in the midst of judgment.

Today Advent begins - and we've lit a candle of hope. But I wonder if it was easy for the people who heard Jeremiah to really embrace that hope. They were struggling - trying to figure out just where God was and what God was doing. Jeremiah has had harsh words about God's expectations for Israel. God's promise of a faithful leader who will bring justice and security is still far off, but God offers this image of new life - a branch or shoot - growing out of a stump.

I can only imagine how it felt for them. *Listen, God's going to do something amazing - and it's going to come from a stump.* We don't tend to see much potential in a stump. We don't see the possibility for a branch to grow - for new life to come.

Jeremiah's community was lost and disoriented. They probably felt as hopeful as a dead stump! What a mission to tell people who would lose everything that they would be restored! And they would have a leader who was after God's own heart - who would bring justice and righteousness. Those two - justice and righteousness - usually go together - and when the prophets bring it up, it's usually a call to lift others up, to see ourselves as a part of God's work to make things better, especially for the most vulnerable - widows, orphans, strangers.

We say we want to make room for others. We want to offer grace and hospitality as it's been offered to us, but it's hard work to prepare space and make room. We say we want that in the church, too - to be a space of welcome, not a place of "no room."

USE SIGN Yet we know that there are many who don't feel welcome or wanted. There

are those who feel rejected or unsure that there's enough room. How do we make room for Christ to dwell?

I had the opportunity to talk to a member of my extended family at our Thanksgiving meal. She has felt called to ministry and is in seminary classes now, and feels especially called to make room for those who have been hurt by the church. On her own journey of understanding God's love for her just as she is, God is calling her to share that Good News. She wants to make space and make sure that they know how much God loves them. It was a sign of hope for me.

And that's what Jeremiah is offering - signs of hope, the promise of new life - for people who are struggling to see it. Even now, hope may feel far off. We continue to look for signs of hope even as we hear of the struggle for justice, the uncertainty around Covid, the fatigue that we're all feeling (some more than others because of their everyday work), and the everyday grief and loss that is present. Where is God bringing something new even from a stump? Where is our hope?

The people of Jeremiah's time needed hope and light in despair and darkness. After they were taken into exile and looked back on this promise, I wonder how they felt. They were under the control of foreign rulers, in exile, away from home, and I wonder how they felt as they waited for the promise of a leader who was fair and good. Jeremiah had offered the image of a branch - a leader who was after God's own heart! I wonder if they want to know how long the wait would be. That's what I want to know - *how long is the wait?* Advent speaks to the place of longing and yearning in us. Advent calls us to the deeper place of hope and trust in God who is making a way.

God will make good on the promises that were made long ago – all the way back to Abraham – because God is committed to the people. God will bring fairness, salvation, and safety. Justice in this time had to do with relationships – even fair-trading practices, and care for the most vulnerable - widows, orphans, and poor. Righteousness meant to be more like God – full of compassion and mercy. So, God promises a transformation in personal and community life. It will happen! *But how long will it be?*

We see God's promised branch from the stump of Jesse real in Jesus Christ because he brings those attributes of justice and righteousness. And we yearn for them still, even as Jesus calls us to seek justice and righteousness. Our hope is in Jesus Christ - as we seek to be more like him and live out of his love and faithfulness.

And maybe that's what this Advent is for – for us to realize just how much we need Christ in our lives. Someone wrote, "Advent is a time to remember just how much the whole world needs Christ." And another take: "We need Advent now more than ever. The season of Advent calls us to wait, to slow down, to let the anticipation of the season build."

So, it's not just preparing physical spaces, but it's getting ready inside of our hearts. We need this season of Advent. Even though we may want to jump to Christmas today, we can't. We have to get beyond the rush and routine of holiday preparations and get to the real preparation. Yes, we prepare for Christ's birth at Christmas, but faith calls us to prepare for his coming again – for the fullness of God's reign on earth.

So, we live always preparing for his coming. And I don't mean trying to figure out when it'll all take place or how or why or where. Our work as people of faith isn't to figure out the details. We are to embody hope in God who will deliver on what is promised.

We trust that God has a plan – and it's bigger and more wonderful than we ever thought it could be. We need to be about living the faith we say we have if this Advent season is going to mean something to us or anyone else. God provides us this time to get ready, so we should take the time and use it wisely.

When the psalmist prays for God to teach, it's a plea for wisdom. And we know that the head and the heart aren't separated, but they're intimately connected. As we learn and grow, we open our hearts more fully to God. That's what we want this season to be. That's the witness we want to extend to other people.

What can we discover in this season? What can we discover about welcome and hospitality? It's not just about what we already know, but what don't we know about God's presence in the world? Where can we be more open and anticipating God showing up in unexpected ways?

If we want to make room, then we have to let some things go. There's that idea of fasting - giving up, sacrificing - so that we can focus more closely on God's presence. What could we let go of? Maybe we give up some of the busyness. Maybe it's some of our preconceptions. Maybe it's giving up the rushing around so we take time to slow down and focus. Maybe it's some of the gifts - or we find a way to give differently so that we don't continue to fill our lives and our homes with more that we don't need.

What would it be like for us to clear out some things and let God in enough to know that we'll come out of this season differently than we entered it? What will God do in us when we make room – to house the Holy, to welcome those who aren't here yet? Where will we find new hope in this season?

Let us pray...