



St. Paul's Church

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Nothing harsh, Nothing burdensome

The beginning of the Christian year, like the secular year we will begin the following month, is often riddled with promises about what our prayer and worship lives will look like. Knowing that resolutions are almost universally dispiriting (especially when we set unrealistic goals for ourselves), we are offering some ideas for making Advent a prayerful time without having it laden with new disciplines. As St. Benedict says in his rule, "Nothing harsh; nothing burdensome." In that spirit we invite you to participate in these offerings as you can, understanding that this is a time of year when we can easily feel overwhelmed.

I am offering an Advent Quiet Day on the morning of **Saturday, December 4, 9-12am**. We will use passages from the readings for Advent this season and introduce ourselves to a variety of different ways to pray, some of them quite

ancient and all (in my view) very helpful in helping to pry open our hearts; it is this openness that we want to cultivate in a world that does not have much time or interest in our patience or our waiting.

On our Facebook page, we will post a meditation three times a week and invite people to comment on it. It will be a chance to share our impressions of how our preparation work is going, questions we have, rough places in our lives we need to make plain. Comments can be posted at any time. It will be a good way to find out how everyone in the St. Paul's family (and beyond) are doing through this season.

On Wednesday nights, we will offer a **Zoom Bible study/meditation time**. There will be nothing to prepare; it will simply be a chance to ask questions in real time about the meaning of the stories we tell about

ourselves on the road during our Advent journeys. It will be very accessible, and we hope it will be a time of learning and frankness with each other.

Finally, we will offer a **Longest Night service on December 21**. The emotional weight we place on this time of year is often a lot to bear. This liturgy will allow us to look at the darkness that has been part of the past year, to acknowledge it so we can move toward the light in front of us. I hope this service will help us make sense, individually and together, of our experiences this past year.

I hope there is at least one of these offerings that everyone can attend. Our Christmas will be more meaningful through the preparation we make.

Something has happened
to the bread
and the wine.

They have been blessed.
What now?
The body leans forward

to receive the gift
from the priest's hand,
then the chalice.

They are something else now
from what they were
before this began.
--Mary Oliver

The book from which this poem is drawn is a study of Oliver's coming to faith, following the death of her longtime partner. For me, it is especially moving because of the context in which we have had to re-think our liturgical lives for almost nineteen months. Like all of us, I have had to consider how important the sacraments are to me, to come to an understanding of what technology can and cannot do, and to accept what I cannot change, particularly in the Holy Communion that is at the center of our collective lives.

I say all this because I have been told that the chalice will find its way back into our celebrations beginning in Advent. We have yet to see the guidelines, (and we all know that the communion in one

kind that we have been celebrating is absolutely valid), but we will have something major returning to our liturgical lives at the beginning of our church year. I believe it is important not only for its own sake—our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers have had communion in one kind for centuries—but for what it means for other parts of our lives

In Both Kinds

together. I am constantly reminded by those around me to be cautious; indeed caution, or its "abundance," has been the watchword of our lives for the better part of two years. But this return to something like liturgical wholeness is a hopeful sign, one that I want to believe will be helpful in our looking ahead to a year where we can afford to be hopeful.

There has been a great deal written about false starts, of "COVID-free summers" that never materialized, of miscalculations about what to expect next, object lessons learned from other countries. In the church, we are blessed indeed to know that Advent signals the waiting and preparation for things that we cannot stop or misunderstand or misconstrue. The advantage we have in our tradition is that Advent is an

invitation to make way for something new, to find a way through our cynicism to open our hearts and allow ourselves to be as receptive as a teenage girl who has just received some very interesting news, for a hairy man telling us to change our minds, to make straight paths that have been crooked for so long we can hardly remember when they were otherwise. We have been given permission, even the responsibility, of bearing hope into the world. We cannot take this chance lightly or waste it on our skepticism about the motives of others. Being a vessel of hope means being able to prepare for something we know will take place. It is not a passive waiting but hopeful expectation of something that will be fulfilled and we are blessed beyond measure for that assurance.

Just as Oliver writes of things being different after the priest consecrates the bread and wine, we too are different, changed from going through these last dark months together, chastened by our belief that we can change or control outside events that we cannot understand. I believe we are invited to see the Advent, the "coming" that we are entering, as an opportunity to cling to what we know within us, something wonderful and true and present within us "before this began."

Deacon's Corner

I did not preach on stewardship this fall, so I thought I'd take the Deacon's Message this month as an opportunity to say a few things about it. This is the season of abundance. The season to take stock, make preparations, to reflect on the growing season that is now in its final phase. The liturgical year turns and then it's Advent.

The birds and squirrels have already gleaned the berries from the dogwood tree outside my study window. The small squirrel, who I've named, "Little One," greets me from the window ledge as she crouches in the protection of the crape myrtle canopy. She has a tail that seems to have bloomed from a skinny, slip of a thing, to a thick mantle. Nature takes its paces. For me, there is comfort in this rhythm, what is familiar in times that are not, our pandemic times continue. The calico asters are just now opening, providing a delicate, lacy look to the garden bed. I am grateful for the few garden chores right at the moment in advance of the larger, final, fall clean-up ahead. The weeds are fewer, spent out. I hope to plant daffodils, something gardeners do when it gets cold and stays that way, then we dream about the abundance of yellow, the color of hope, sprung up in flowers that symbolize what is not yet but will be.

On my mind is the command to "love thy neighbor," Gardeners love their neighbors in their handiwork: we grow plants that bring forth birds and tiny buzzing things, butterflies that feed on plants that in turn, bring motion and color to our corners of the world. We have colorful views for our neighbors to enjoy outside their windows. We even leave zucchini bounty on porches. Gardeners, after all, are tenders, Creation-caretakers. This all looks like abundance to me. And it starts with the action of one small thing. One seed put into the darkness of the soil.

The daylight falls away as quickly as the cooler temperatures have fallen in. As garden things will get put into the shed—the shed that I have designated to

tidy as a fall garden activity—I see an abundance of colorful leaves swirl and drop, landing softly on the soil of the garden border. Behind, is left the bud that will become next year's leaf.

~The Rev. Jeannie Marcucci, Deacon

Books

As you may expect, there is a cottage industry involving Advent meditations, some original and some culled from the writings of saints and notable persons in the church. Many are wonderful and I thought I would explore two very different volumes here.

The first is *Our December Hearts* by the Rev. Anne McConney (Morehouse, 1999), a lyrical exploration of each day throughout Advent and Christmastide. McConney is wonderful at evoking the humanity of us all as we look to encounter a very human God. She is not afraid of talking of darkness as part of the waiting, nor of revealing her own weaknesses on her journey. The meditations themselves are very readable and, in my view, a joy for anyone who are willing to see the promise of a "God with us" through the lens of vulnerability.

The second is a heavily edited book of writings, some quite personal from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor executed by the Nazis in 1945 for participating in the plot to assassinate Hitler. It is organized thematically by week: Waiting, Mystery, Redemption and Incarnation, with succeeding meditations for Christmastide and Epiphany. *God is in the Manger* (Morehouse, 2010) makes an effort to place Bonhoeffer's words in an accessible context; a passage from scripture follows the excerpt from his writings. It is a more directed approach to Advent than McConney's but will appeal to those who want to know better a one of the great protestant theological voices from the last century.

Both books are available from Morehouse Publishing or Amazon.

Stewardship

As our year ends, I want to encourage all to make sure pledges are up-to date. It would also be wonderful if all of us could have our pledges for 2022 turned in by November 14th. Thank you all for your support of St. Paul's and its mission in our community!

Thank you

Many thanks to all who have helped in our food programs this year. The transition was not simple but was made thoroughly enjoyable through the hard work of many people. We are blessed indeed!