

“Remembering the Future”

I’m in kind of an awkward position here, I think. It’s not just that I’m perched on the edge of the chancel which is obviously set up for something rather spectacular to happen; I am quite literally standing between you and a long-anticipated musical event.

It’s as though your favorite wacky uncle has arrived for Christmas, laden with packages and a well-deserved reputation for unusual gift-giving, but all the adults want to stand in the doorway and yak; or it’s like somebody about to offer a long-winded grace before Thanksgiving Dinner: you can smell the food and you wonder how long the prayer is going to be. Here the musicians are warmed up and ready to go and the preacher gets up to talk.

I suppose in that sense I’m a pretty good representative of the season of Advent. It stands between us and the celebration we all know is coming.

Frankly, it’s hard to keep the mind from racing during Advent. All around us everything is moving so fast and Advent is so slow. We sit in church lighting one new candle each week, making mental lists of all the things we have to accomplish so that the holiday will happen as we envision it in our minds. There are gifts to buy and wrap, grocery shopping to do, cards to send and house cleaning to accomplish and the list isn’t getting any shorter while we’re thinking about it. It is tough to just sit and *be*; but we try our best with our purple candles and our plainchant hymns in minor keys.

Among clergy, Advent can unleash all the worst of our latent Puritan instincts, leading us to banish all mention of Christmas during Advent, permit no Christmas Carols or Alleluias, seeing such frivolity as clear evidence of superficiality—the stuff of shopping malls and shallow Christians whose faint faith won’t allow them to practice impulse control. The liturgically correct wallow in a self-imposed artificial anguish of delayed gratification, subsisting like Scrooge on the thinnest possible gruel: wasn’t Advent great this year? Yes! I don’t think anybody liked it!

It is helpful to reflect every once in a while that the seasons of the church year are an artificial device. They help us organize the mysteries of our Christian faith so that we can focus on them one at a time; but then we begin to expect those mysteries to stand patiently in line and to dutifully erupt into our lives on schedule.

God is the One who is coming to us; always coming to us as the embodiment of our hope for peace, joy and love. God is the One in whom all human longings find their focus. God is the heart of our yearning, who reveals the emptiness at the center of our lives—an expectant emptiness only God can fill. We remember this in Advent.

But God is also and at the same time One who is being born, appearing among us in helplessness, poverty and obscurity; mounting a sneak attack on the human soul in the form of an infant we cannot resist. We call that mystery Christmas.

And God-in-Christ is also among us all grown up, calling us into discipleship and engaging in active ministry in the world: preaching, teaching and healing to reveal God's realm on earth and to demand a response. The realm of God is in your midst: repent and believe in the good news as we proclaim it in the season of Epiphany.

Simultaneously God is suffering love: rejected by the very ones God comes among us to save—which is to say, rejected by us. And God becomes, again and again and in every instant, the victim—the casualty really, because we are so casual about it—of the best political and religious institutions human beings can create. For Jesus was crucified, as Frederick Buechner likes to point out, at the intersection of Jewish piety and Roman so-called justice. These institutions collaborate to brush God aside as casually as a Roman governor would snuff out a Galilean peasant... and that outpouring of God's suffering love finds focus in the season of Lent.

God dies, as we all must die. Good Friday is when we dare to remember that.

But God also lives again because love wins to save us from the sin-ridden selves we try so hard to keep hidden from the God who will never tire of calling us to get out of ourselves, get over ourselves to receive the gift of the new life God gives every day. This, too, happens every day, but we remind ourselves with Hallelujahs at Easter.

And God is among us at every moment as Holy Spirit, granting us gifts of the Spirit to use in joyful witness to the triumphant power of life. We remember those gifts and celebrate that Spirit particularly at Pentecost—but it's here and now all the time.

Taken altogether, this is our story. It tells us that God is all of this, all at the same time. How can we make sense of that? All of this is true right

now: God is coming, born, working, suffering, dying, rising and present as Spirit in this moment. It's too much!

And so we organize it into our seasons with different colors; we tell the story in parts, a little bit at a time; we ride the cycle of the church year because to skip any part of the story, to fail to live into it more and more deeply each time we live through it is always to miss something crucial. We discipline ourselves to live season by season.

And in the name of this discipline we usually refrain from singing Christmas music during Advent... except at the end when we weaken just a bit.

But today, as though we can't quite help ourselves, we're about to cave in completely. Today—almost right now, if only I will stop talking—we're going to rush ahead to remember why we're waiting. We are going to indulge in the surpassing joy that transcends self-control, like the crazy father in Jesus' story who sees his wayward son coming home—sees him at a great distance and, abandoning all dignity, sets out across a manure-laden field, arms and legs and robes flying, that the tearful embrace of reunion might not be delayed even an extra second.

Today we proclaim “Hodie!” because today is the day God comes to us; and so we remember that this season we call Advent is special for a reason.

God is still the One who is coming to us.

Isaiah's hope for the return of exiles who are now suddenly granted a highway, smooth and straight through the barren wilderness, from the despair of exile to the promise of the Holy City on the hill—once a smoldering ruin and shining and glorious as a light to the nations—that is happening today. It is precisely because the hope for a world at peace in the joy and love of God finds a place in our hearts and makes those hearts beat faster and faster that we erupt into joy.

We rejoice because it's true: the whole, wonderful story; not just today and not just on December 25th, but every today: Christ is born among us and within us to transform our lives and our world.

So let's take a break from preparing the guest room and remember who's coming. Don't overthink this: I already did that for you. Just let it wash over you and fill you with joy.

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

4126 Ingersoll Avenue

Des Moines, Iowa 50312

(515) 255-3149

Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM

Fax: 515-255-8667

E-mail: druhe@plymouthchurch.com