

The Wonderful Gift of Uncertainty

Advent 1B, November 27, 2011

I don't much care for the message of Advent: Wake up! Be watchful and ready.

First of all, I love my sleep, and I never get enough of it. But, too, I want to know, like the disciples, like Mark's church: wake up and watch for what? From whom, and when, and how, and why? And what's in it for me?

There's a lot of *not* knowing here and I like to know. In fact, I like to be in charge of it all. The problem with all that waiting and watching is that it leaves you completely out of control.

Just before the Nazis martyred him, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

A prison cell is like Advent. You wait. You do little unneeded things. And you are utterly dependent on the door to freedom being opened from the outside.

The drama of Advent is one of uncertainty. Of *not* knowing, *not* having, *not* being in charge, *not* having the keys. I wonder if any of you feel that any of that is what's wrong with your life just now.

Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, Zechariah, John, the shepherds, the magi, Anna, Simeon – not one of them had the power to command their own future, or fate, or even their bodies. (Well, the magi did, but not once they had listened to their hearts and climbed on top of their camels!)

Sudden angels, scandalous pregnancies, muteness, long, hard, uncharted journeys, insomnia, disturbing dreams, humiliation, isolation, shame, and real danger to life and limb – these things made them absolutely sure of only this: that they could be absolutely sure of nothing.

Still, they said yes.

“Yes, I will have this baby, trust this dream, marry this girl, name him John, make that long trip, follow that star, go home by another road – not knowing the why, or when, or wherefore, waiting and wondering for all I'm worth, and having no clue how it all will end, still, even so, because it's you, God of my heart, who is asking – yes.

“Yes. Because with all I *don't* know, I *do* know you are in this. Somehow you are in this chaos, this darkness, this very unknowing, and only there can I know you. Only in *not* having all that I think I *must* have, can I have you. Only in losing and letting go can I win and gain what matters, which is you, God. Only you.”

They were as ordinary as us. And just as reluctant and scared as we can be when life is terrifyingly uncertain. Still, their saying “Yes”, when everything in them is screaming “NO” brought us a savior. What might your “Yes” bring, even if, especially if, it’s born out of uncertainty.

The drama of Advent which we’re invited again today to join is one of uncertainty, which most of us will do anything to avoid.

But, in his poem, “Going to God with the Shepherds,” William Countryman advises,

If you want to go to God, go without your certainties. Take your graces, but leave your certainties behind.

Only in *not* knowing can we most truly encounter the God who knows us so deeply, and loves us so dearly, and asks us to go with only that.

The gospel lesson today is addressed to people in the grip of a terrifying unknowing, a violent, uncertain time whose suffering they can’t understand, and at whose end they cannot imagine light and joy, so dark is the darkness. Jerusalem and the Temple have been decimated by the Romans. Life as they know it has come undone. Maybe they truly did fear that the stars might fall and the sun and moon be snuffed out. People in every age have thought that theirs were the end times. We, too, wonder if natural disasters, terrorism, a failing economy, and the crumbling of things we have long trusted in are sure signs of an imminent end.

We’re scared and want something to hold onto. We wonder if God sees or hears, and can save us, or even cares. We shudder at what could befall us next. Mark has a word of comfort for his own people, and for any people in the frightening grip of such uncertainty.

Wake up, he says! Stay alert. Be watchful and ready. Even in times like these. Especially in times like these.

Well, I don’t know about you, but that doesn’t help me much. If I were any more watchful, any wider awake, I’d be jumping out of my skin! I’m already watching my back, the ozone, the Dow, the gas prices, and my cholesterol, alert to computer viruses, identity theft, climate change, the decline of the Church, the rise of interest rates, the stagnancy of my pension, the aging of my body, whether anyone really likes me, and whatever new unthinkable threat might come next!

No, I’m wide awake, and you probably are, too. But maybe it’s to all the wrong things. Maybe our hyper-alertness to what could go wrong if we let down our guard for even a second is really only a trance of fear. A trance of misplaced trust that can lull the faithful heart to sleep.

How, this Advent, could we awaken from that trance? How could we wake up to the utterly sure and unfailing love that upholds us every minute, lighting our way through every darkness? What could wake us up wide to that love, like the perfect kiss awaking the maiden? God's solid love for each of us *is* that kiss, the one thing worth waking up to and for.

"If you want to go to God," says Countryman, "Leave your certainties behind. Take only your graces. If you want to go to God, take the goodness of your life, and some moment of uncertain, life-giving hope, like an angel whispering-or perhaps trumpeting-in your ear. These are your guides. Leave your certainties behind but be sure to take your graces."

The gift of uncertainty, the gift of things being unknown and unknowable, beyond our control, is that then and only then can we learn how true and safe and sure is God's love, and how precious it is to lean on it.

At the start of this new Advent, what *don't* you know? What big questions are burning in you? What are the things that scare you? What *can't* you manage, fix, or control?

How could you honor those things, embrace them, love them, sit with them, even in the darkest dark, waiting for God's light only?

What are the certainties you lean on and long for? How could you exchange them for the guidance and grace of uncertainty? How could your empty wanting and helpless waiting, your very not knowing or having, become, as it did for Mary, the place of God's birthing within you? The place where, more intimately than ever before, you meet the one who is already there, waiting right there in the dark unknowing, for you to find and be found by your God.

Amen.