

Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church
Advent 3
12/15/2024
Luann Yutzy

Isaiah 61:1-11
Luke 4:16-21

Working title: The God We Hardly Knew (credit to William Willimon)

Here we are, the third Sunday of Advent already. I hear around me people being overwhelmed and not having enough time to get things done or to get ready for something, me included, a whole house full of people calls for some preparation. Advent is meant to be a time of preparation to prepare *our* hearts to receive a gift.

It may be easy to tune Advent out with all the rushing and hurrying and programs and traditions to keep up. It's all fun, mostly, right? Yet Advent doesn't jar us awake anymore or maybe it never did.

It's kind of like buying a house and how you can look and look and you finally found one you love and after you have moved in you realized you are one block from the train tracks (how did I not see that) and a train comes through every night at 3:00am and blows its whistle many times.

But how many nights does it take before you don't even notice? You sleep through all the whistles eventually.

We get used to the coming of Christ into our world, how Christ entered then and how Christ is present with us now. We can be lulled into a slumber.

The third Sunday in Advent is often called Rejoice Sunday with the focus on Joy. The candle goes from purple to Rose in the Advent candle to lighten the mood, I guess as we wait.

And in our text this morning from Isaiah we hear joy and good news. The prophet is giving encouragement to a disheartened Hebrew people who may be out of exile but are still in captivity of disillusionment and wondering what just happened and how will we ever recover? We can relate in many ways. We hear in Isaiah 61 of God's vision in ushering in the real world. We are told what salvation really is, that it's about life here and now, a quality of life that reflects God's care for humanity. That salvation is good news not just for us here in our church buildings but for:

- the oppressed
- the poor
- the brokenhearted
- the captive
- the imprisoned
- the mourning
- the grieving
- the faint in spirit
- the ruined

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- the devastated
- the shamed and disgraced
- the weeping
- the lowly
- the hungry¹

And if we don't believe that, Jesus made it even clearer in his first sermon, his first reading, what he chose to read for the first time in the synagogue was Isaiah 61 the part that says, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To set the burdened and battered free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He left out the piece from Isaiah 61 about the day of vengeance of our God in verse 2.

The scripture in Luke 4 was right after Jesus wrestled out his identity 40 days in the wilderness and Jesus was defining who he was, describing his life and why he was here and why we are to be here. He was bringing hope for a weary world and in leaving out the vengeance, he was ushering in a kingdom of shalom for all people and promoting reconciliation with our enemies. This is how we are going to do it now. He left the doors wide open for people outside the nation of Israel.

He went on to mention in Luke 4 that there were many widows but it was the widow at Zarephath, a foreigner, who the Prophet Elijah was sent to and there were many lepers in Israel but the leper that was healed was Naaman, the Syrian. This message would have been very confrontational to think that others could receive salvation and that good news was for outside their own religious establishments.

If you look at verse 28, further down in Luke 4, those in the synagogue were filled with rage. they got up and drove him out of town and led him to the top of the hill on which their town was built so they might throw him off of the cliff. but he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. He was just beginning; he couldn't be killed yet.

I remember hearing my first sermon that was on social justice, of salvation as ushering in a kingdom of shalom, caring for the poor, acknowledging how we can create systems that become evil, keeping people out and keeping people caught in the socioeconomic system. It was so different than sermons I had heard up to that point in my life that were more about individual salvation, living right to be worthy of God's love, dressing appropriately, all the outward symbols, morality especially for girls and women- we had an extra dose of that one. This was really pretty shocking to hear a sermon on social justice later in my life and I thought this person was really out there. I have realized that was another thing I needed to unlearn from my past that Jesus coming to earth was not just for me, it was for the sake of the whole world

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3652-this-single-truth>

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bringing the kind of justice that shapes a community where everyone has what they need, and that's what each of us is here for too- *for the sake of each other.*

Oscar Romero says it well in this poem:

“No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor.

the self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God - for them there will be no Christmas.

Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone.

That someone is God.

Emmanuel.

God - with - us.

Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.”

Oscar Romero

This season, more than any in the year, seems to be about giving. yet we are receivers before we are givers. Until we have really grasped how we need the gift of Jesus too and receive him with humility we may then know how to really give.

God's special regard for the lowly and the weakest, the vulnerable is our mission too and it's not something we give to or give money to but what we need to grasp is that the mission that Jesus talked about in reading Isaiah 61 for his first text defined him and that is what is to define us. this is why we exist for the sake of :

- the oppressed
- the poor
- the brokenhearted
- the captive
- the imprisoned
- the mourning
- the grieving
- the faint in spirit
- the ruined
- the devastated
- the shamed and disgraced
- the weeping
- the lowly
- the hungry²

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Whether they are a member of our religious establishment or not. Mission comes out of an inner humility that we too have received the gift of Christ born in us and we would love for you to know you are loved in that way and have your needs met.

Advent happens with Christ breaking into our weary world. Sacred and ordinary hold expectant space together.

I didn't expect God to show up when I rode the Southwest Chief or the Capital Limited trains when I traveled to Virginia a couple Advents ago. It was a time when Robert was serving a church in Virginia and I was coming out for Thanksgiving. Part of our time would be to go with our daughter's family on a trip to Ohio to be with family as our niece was dying and in her last days. She and our daughter had grown up together until about age 11 and they had an afternoon together as she was dying.

I expect to see division even more in the world than in religious circles. That just makes sense to me. But on my train ride, there seemed to be an openness to community-building. There were a lot of students on the train from Chicago going east who were going home or to relatives for Thanksgiving. I heard young people having conversations with older people, talking about what they were studying. One conversation was a primary care physician, a professor in Wisconsin sharing what he learned over the years with a medical student and giving him encouragement in his studies. Students were talking to each other and laughing together. They didn't know each other before. We were all strangers together and we were a community together *not bound by common beliefs or theology. We were just traveling in the same general direction at the same time and place.*

On the Capitol Limited 29 train on the way back from Harper's Ferry, WV to Chicago, I laughed and shared stories and tea with a woman from Cleveland. We talked about her granddaughter and her illness she was living with. We looked at pictures of her little Yorkie. She asked me my name and I said Luann and she said you look like a Luann. I didn't know what to say to that so we laughed. There was mutual respect and we were strangers.

I sat across the table in the dining car with a woman from Chicago and drank coffee with her as we talked about life and when she found out I was a minister, she said, "I'm not a Christian, sorry to say." She said, "I can't take the judgmental people. I respect Jesus and how he lived his life though." As she told me more of who she was and her love for people and wanting all people to have what they need, she reflected who Jesus was to me.

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I watched outside the Auntie Anne's pretzel shop in the Food Court in Union Station in Chicago as morning commuters streamed through, dark clothes, hands in pockets. Where are they going? Who do they go home to? Do they live with joy or despair like the rest of us? The people opened the windows to the food stalls and called out good morning to each other, calling each other by name. I imagined they do that every morning.

In the Great Hall in Union Station I heard a conversation behind me, a young man was saying, "I used to go to church when I was little on Wednesday evenings and Sunday. I always felt lonely around church, he said. They don't teach about God in church. They teach you what they want you to know." He said, "I randomly ask people if Christ is coming back." The stranger (or was it God) listening to the younger man told him to not give up on things he hopes to do in life. The younger man talked incessantly and the second man stayed present and listened better and engaged better than I have ever heard. Such acceptance.

As I faced the celestial Christmas tree in the Great Hall at Union Station, waiting on the Southwest Chief to Newton, I talked for an hour and a half to a woman from Little Rock about food and recipes we have tried. She enlightened me on her holiday cake called Elvis Presley pound cake and told me the secret to using okra in soup without the slime. I just needed to cut it bigger so it cooks slower.

In the observation car, Amish girls had connected with a group of teenagers from Lawrence and were singing in German with the German exchange student. They were asking her about life in Germany.

And from the train tracks going behind the towns I saw scenes of hidden life in America:

- The stark outline of an elderly Amish man watching the train leave the South Bend station, his long beard reaching his stomach
- Mounds of junked cars in IL right by the tracks
- Deer turning and running away with their white tails
- Police putting yellow tape around a house early in the morning in a small town in IN, a crime scene
- Around 9:00 pm, in South Bend, flames from a fire in a barrel and three men around it warming themselves talking and turning and waving to the train as we went by
- The earth we have been given to care for was magnificent in the ice that clung to the rocky mountainsides
- the warm lights of Cleveland with Lake Erie on the left as we rolled through going east
- lights appearing in houses as dawn approached

It was Advent on the Train for me that year.

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Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!

Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices
O night divine, O night when Christ was born.

And that might be what we need to hear the Advent train whistle again, to get us out of the glazed- eyes look and sit up. We prepare to receive the wonder of God coming to earth by receiving a gift that can change us and change the world. We just receive.

We get on board with the mission Jesus was about. It will define us too. To be with the people of the world and bring in the real kingdom.

And God will arrive to be with us wherever we are.

That is the wonder of it.

May it be so.