



2017 Advent Meditations

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Advent I, 2017

“...you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

An Advent Meditation from the Rev. Dr. Richard Haley

So stated the angels to the shepherds on the day Jesus was born, as Luke remembers it for us. Notice two things about the statement.

First, this was a declaration of fact not a statement of a possibility: “You **SHALL** find...,” not **MAYBE** you’ll find. And that ought to say something to us about Jesus - if, like the shepherds, we expect to find Jesus then, like the shepherds, we will find him. As Jesus himself said many years later, “Seek and ye **SHALL** find...” So...this Christmas let us give ourselves the gift of rediscovering the presence of Christ in our lives and ministries, in our families and neighborhoods, in our churches and dare I suggest in our politics too - you **SHALL** find said the angels!

Second thing to notice: where did the shepherds find Jesus? In a manger, that is, a feeding trough for animals. And of course the manger was in some kind of stable or structure or cave where the animals were kept. Ugh!!! Not pretty and not sanitary, maybe not even completely “safe.” And we’re not told in the story what the birth was like. Was it unattended - no midwives or helpers? Did Mary and Joseph “go it alone?”

The point being this: the shepherds were told they would find the child in a place and under circumstances where ordinarily a new-born would not be found. And really, isn’t that the reality of the gospel, the Good News - Jesus is to be found where least expected and where most needed?

Our challenge this Advent and Christmas is to join the shepherds in listening to the angels and expect to find Jesus where least expected, and most needed, such as:

- Places like Las Vegas and Texas and any where else where unchecked gun violence assaults our sense of safety and may even threaten our faith in God. If we don’t expect to find Jesus there we won’t find him. If we do, we will see his activity even in the midst of violence and maybe we will even see, or become the people who commit themselves finally to doing something about this, regardless of what the NRA says.

- The poisonous political atmosphere where insults and partisan politics prevail and the good of the country seems only secondary. If we don't expect to find Jesus there we won't find him. If we do, we will see his activity even in the midst of political inaction as perhaps a few politicians dare to cross lines and attempt to work together.

And of course we could name many other tough and trying circumstances and events that push our sense of Jesus' reality to the limits. But it can't be said enough: if we do not expect to find Jesus, we won't find him. If we do expect to find him then, like the shepherds, we will go away with something profound to talk about.



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Advent II, 2017

A Time in Between

An Advent Meditation from the Rev. Jacki Belile

A part of Advent spirituality is welcoming—on purpose—the discomfort of being “in between.” Like our Jewish ancestors, we may often find ourselves “in between” the remembrances of God’s caring call and the assurance of a good future we cannot now see.

I know I often say “I believe; help my unbelief.”

We started Advent this season at my Chicago church with a remembrance of God’s good creation, bringing Light and Order and Vision to our world. We pondered how that same God is Love Incarnate in Jesus, a Love that fully embraces our imperfections.

This past week, we lifted the promises of Hope, and listened to the wisdom of Zechariah’s prayer which blesses his son John’s mission. A mission that fulfills hope’s promise *with the forgiving Savior*. Ultimately, there is no hope for any of us without this forgiveness.

Wherever you find yourselves in the “in between” of the real world, may you savor or rediscover the wise way of this time: intentionally remembering God’s faithfulness and practicing a daily trust in Christ’s forgiving presence. In Light of this One, our future is indeed secure.



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Advent III, 2017

Waiting for Christ's Return

An Advent Meditation from the Rev. Malcolm Hamblett

The Scriptures indicate that “the day of the Lord” will come quickly, like a thief in the night (Zephaniah 1:14-15; II Thessalonians. 2:2), and therefore Christians must be watchful and ready for the return of Christ at any moment.

Peter expands upon it in his letter. (Read II Peter 3:10-18)

These words of Peter’s are good ones for us to consider during this Advent season as we prepare to commemorate the anniversary of Jesus’s first coming. When Jesus was born the people had been without a king for almost 600 years. God had promised that they would one day have a king again, one descended from King David. Many people were waiting but most of them missed it. Jesus wasn’t what they were expecting. They were waiting but they were waiting without expectation.

Before He died Jesus told His disciples that He was going ahead of them into heaven to get things ready for His followers and that one day He would return to bring them home. The first generation of Christians lived with the expectation that Jesus would return within their lifetime. The gospels and the various letters tell us Christians how we should live while we are waiting for Jesus to return.

Peter challenges us to consider how this coming certain destruction of everything transitory should cause us to live. We need to live with the expectation that Jesus *will* return.

We’ve been waiting for almost 2,000 years for Jesus to return, longer than the nation of Israel waited for Him to come the first time. That’s a long time to wait. And Peter says there will be people who scoff at the idea that Jesus will return. “Where is this coming He promised?” (II Peter 3:4) And they go about doing what they want.

I believe Jesus will return. I don’t know when, but I do not believe it will be in the near or immediate future. There are still many prophesied events that need to happen

before He will return. Will Jesus return in my lifetime? Perhaps. I would be surprised if He returns within 15 years. He might, but I don't see that as likely.

However, even though I don't believe Jesus will return anytime soon, that doesn't give me license to live the way I want to, thinking there is still time to repent later. It doesn't mean that I don't have to be alert, pray and stay close to God. However, believing and knowing Jesus will not and cannot come back soon should not change anything about needing to "always be ready" and not backslide into sin. The reason is that we all are mortal and can lose our life tomorrow. King Solomon reminds us that no one knows when his hour will come. (Ecclesiastes. 9:11-12). Because we can "meet our maker" at any moment we always need to be ready as Jesus taught. We are to be constantly vigilant so as not to allow ourselves to backslide.

Peter says we are to live holy and godly lives as we look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. Living a holy and godly life means that we should hate what Jesus hates, love what He loves, and evaluate everything in our lives and relationships by the standard of God's Word. John tells us to "continue in Jesus so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28, NIV).

Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus.



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Advent IV, 2017

Responding to Humanity's Call for Leadership

An Advent Meditation from the Rev. Ivan L. Marable

Christian theologians may view the term humanity as having origins with the creative action of God. God in creating humans established relationship with God's creation of the "Human Race" in his divine imagine.

God in relationship with humanity must expect and assume a vital level of dialogue, accountability, and responsibility. Moreover, I believe it to be fair of God to expect reasonable and perhaps at times beyond reasonable levels of dialogue, accountability, and responsibility from humanity.

Subsequently, I view Advent in terms of its historical foundation. My view of advent simply stated is a call from humanity to their God to provide a leader that they could relate too. Perhaps a King, Prince, or Minister: a boots on the ground person of deep love, respect and integrity. A person humanity found, tangible, pragmatic, and relational towards community. God responded to humanity's call for leadership in the affirmative first choosing Saul, and then choosing David. I argue that this historical formation of advent offers evidence of humanity's participation and God's procession toward the monarchy in response to humanity's call.

Certainly advent is a spiritual and perhaps holy season. Advent is a time when the "people of God" consider the grace, mercy, and love of God, particularly in the suffering, death, and resurrection of God's child, Jesus Christ. We have created rituals, worship moments, and written reflections to pay homage, praise, and prayer alms to God through Christ during our interaction with family and community.

The writer of Second Samuel 7:1-17 created a trinitarian like moment of dialogue, accountability, and responsibility as David reflected on the blessings, peace, and love God had bestowed on him and the people of God. David shared with the prophet Nathan that he was motivated to build a house for God to reside. Nathan affirmed David's motivation assuring him God was with him.

Subsequently, during the night the writer recorded the spiritual revelation of God's word imparted to Nathan. God questioned David's plan to build a house for him. I sense God believed David's time and labor may be well spent on the success he he had experienced building the community of Israel continuing to enhance vision and confidence of the Israel tribal leaders and safe well-being of their community. God reminded Nathan of David's ascension from the pasture of sheep herding to prince leading the people of God. God disclosed to Nathan that David had earned his favor there was "peace in the land" the people of Israel/children of God may worship, rest, and feel safe with God at their side and David as their leader. Finally, God revealed to Nathan that he had made provisions for David's family and offspring and the families and children of Israel.

In conclusion, I believe we all desire throughout "Advent" and our journey through life to experience peace in the land, safety for our offspring, community, and vocations. God in response to humanity's call for leadership continues to improve dialogue, accountability, and responsibility with leadership, the house (Kingdom of God), and the intersection of humanity and the divine with the birth of Jesus Christ subsequent to the faith of Mary and Mary's beyond reasonable levels of (Luke 1: 46b-55) testimony in welcoming the "Advent of God's plan in her (humanity's) life."



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Christmas, 2017

The Love of God ... Our Best Hope

An Advent Meditation from the Rev. Dr. Kate Harvey Jacobs

On a long, long road trip recently we had Sirius radio incessantly tuned to a station that plays pops from the past. I bet you can guess the song title word that appeared by far the most frequently on the Sirius radio screen in front of us as we traveled. What word would most appear in the titles of our favorite music? LOVE. Although very long, that journey was truly beautiful because it felt totally enfolded in love by the sound track that accompanied us, rather than the contentious commentary that too often fills the airwaves.

On this journey of life as well, the quality that our souls most yearn to find is also love, and where love is God is. While love is the gift of God to us, it is also the house we create together where God resides. From ancient times people like King David wanted to build a house for God, perhaps out of a longing to keep God near, to feel assurance that God is always with us, to know that love is actually with us. Where love is, God is. But this journey of life is so challenging and messy at times that, much as we yearn for love to be the primary motif, we sometimes wonder how it can be so.

Back to the music that accompanies us on the journey of our lives. BBC once released a video that has utterly captivated me, of numerous superb musicians, all sorts of famous instrumentalists and soloists, together performing the old Beach Boys' hit "God Only Knows." I have been obsessed by that video not because of its excellence or even because the Beach Boys and their music backgrounded my life in the 1960's but because the song "God Only Knows" is featured in a movie produced in 2003 that reminds me of you -- people who take care of one another on this journey of life.

"Love Actually" is the name of that movie. It begins with travelers arriving at Heathrow Airport in London, greeted by loved ones whose presence blesses their lives in this journey of life. As we observe the heathbreakingly beautiful reunions of real people -- not actors, at the opening and the closing scenes these are real people reconnecting after journeys apart -- a voiceover sets the theme: "Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion's starting to

make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there - fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, partners, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge - they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around.”

Love actually IS all around. Here is why that movie reminds me of you: my favorite moments working as executive director of the Ministers Council (1995-2008) were when I saw you as unique individuals and separate stories filled with all the loves and losses, all the joys and sorrows, all the struggles and triumphs; yet simultaneously I see you all together as a beautiful collage, the place where God resides, in the love you share. Love actually IS all around.

Time and time again I have seen that love received and passed on, and I know God is here.

The movie “Love Actually” is set around Christmas time and traces all sorts of human stories through the ups and downs of the journey as the characters are driven by the hunger to love and be loved, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, always longing for love. The final ending (again as at the very beginning, real people, not actors, greeting one another at Heathrow Airport) – that ending rushes toward the viewer through all sorts of human love relationships underlined with the song’s repeated words “God only knows what I’d be without you,” resolving into a collage of ever more and more, ever tinier and tinier videos of people showing their love in hugs and kisses, in smiles and tears: across cultures and colors, gay and straight, romantic relationships, kids and parents, grandparents, friends.... at the very end all those images transformed into an all-encompassing heart-shaped collage.

God only knows what I’d be without you. That is what the world needs to consider, to be aware of the collective human need for love and for each other, multiplied over all times and places and relationships. That is what WE need to consider. God only knows what WE would be without each other. We need one another and God resides in our love. To me the big message of the Church is that God lives where human beings love. God is here, in our love.

You see, the best hope of the world is not found in correct theology, it is found in the love expressed through actions, even when and maybe especially when the journey is difficult. Our best hope is that in Jesus Christ we see God as God really is, and through our loving relationships in the name and the way of Jesus Christ God sees us as Christs to one another.

Thomas Merton put it this way: "...I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another.... It was like waking from a dream of separateness.... I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God became incarnate.... Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed." ([Merton, Thomas. 1966. Conjectures of a guilty bystander.](#))

Love IS all around, and we thank God. God only knows what we'd be without US. The message of Christmas is that God's Spirit fills and flows through our togetherness, and we too are called to be Christs to the world.



Kate Harvey Jacobs served in the 1980s on the Ministers Council Senate, Executive Committee, and as editor of Minister Magazine, then as Executive Director of the Ministers Council from 1995 to 2008. Her earlier work included teaching and then pastoring, ultimately at the First Baptist Church in America founded in 1638 by her hero, Roger Williams.