

ALIVE WITH GRATITUDE, AWAKE IN HOPE

For God is good; your kindness is toward the world. ~ Psalm 100

Wherever you have been and with whomever you have been these last few days to pay tribute to the Thanksgiving holiday, it seems to have a way with us, giving us pause to stop in our often relentless and full lives to exercise some purposeful gratitude. I've been eavesdropping on and noticing a number of Facebook friends who have been participating in 30 days of gratitude for November. Each day they post and remember one thing they are grateful and thankful for. Thanksgiving is, after all, about remembering. It is easy, on some level to feel good at this time of year. It is also easy to feel bad, especially if we haven't sufficient reason to feel good.

At Thanksgiving in particular, I often find myself remembering too a bit of the partial history of this holiday. Some years back, Kathy and I visited family on the east coast and stood at the sight of the Pilgrims Monument in Massachusetts for its annual lighting. What came to mind was something I read about Pilgrim descendant friends who go into hiding this time of year. "I really don't like the Pilgrims" writes one, "for just because they were cheerful in tough times, and thankful, and worked hard, and all of that, everybody thinks we should do the same. It was an ill wind that blew the Mayflower into Plymouth Harbor." And the current times remind us as we still face a fragile economy, watch typhoon forces cause unfathomable destruction in the Philippines, witness the news of ongoing confusion and danger in the Middle East, as well as a litany of other serious issues and realities, that all is not well in our world.

When these moods hit, and they do or they will; when we are not grateful or thankful or happy on cue; when the calendar and culture tell us to be pleased, happy, thankful, and joyful whether we are or not; when we remember the advice of our mothers to always be nice or sincere or polite, we are also living in our own and collective realities of being buffeted by the ill winds of our own time in the midst of much uncertainty and destabilizing forces. It is not so easy.

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~Harry Emerson Fosdick

These past few days have also given way to what is known on the Christian calendar as the season of Advent, which comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning coming, which leads us to the celebration of Christmas. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, a time that beckons us to begin a journey of faith anew, a new year, a season of preparation, waiting and expectation – a time to awaken and enliven us in matters of the soul, to ask ourselves over the course of these four successive Sundays of Advent how we are alive and active participants with God in this between time that eventually ends in the Christian narrative story of Christmas – God with us, coming among us as the Christ child. It is also, I believe, an invitation to each of us toward humility, modesty, faith and trust.

Nevertheless, it is a challenge for us to live in and even acknowledge this holy season known as Advent. Many of us, if not most of us, already have Christmas on our minds and are tilting toward December 25. Only hours after giving thanks for all that we have, we know that stores were opening to greet anxious Black Friday shoppers wanting more. The irony here should not be lost on us. Shopping, hanging the greens, decking the halls and Christmas carols seem high on the list of expectations in a culture driven by wanting and not waiting. The retail bonanza is well underway, revealing how much seems wrong with this picture. Please don't misunderstand me – I do enjoy Christmas and we will have some lovely greens to enjoy here in Memorial Church on Tuesday of this week, as well as a traditional Advent wreath and candles right here, marking the four Sundays between now and Christmas – but it often feels like too huge a leap over a really sacred and instructive season for us. I'll come back to the Advent wreath and candles shortly.

I must be honest – upon reading the appointed gospel for today in Matthew, this preacher, if not most preachers, winced a little. It is really at odds with the season because it tilts toward a different day altogether. This gospel and the Jesus that is presented seems not at all interested in Christmas, but rather focused on what we would call an apocalyptic (catastrophic) day in the unknown future when the Son of God will suddenly return and lives will be quickly and surprisingly changed. This “shall come again language” of Scripture gives many of us the creeps and we do not need to lean very far to the theological left to be prone to dismiss this line of thinking as somewhere way

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out there to the right. So, full disclosure: I would have preferred to move quickly on and discuss the

timeless Isaiah text evoking a poetic narrative of peace that Jackie read for us.

Needless to say, there's a push and pull going on today – the powerful push toward Christmas that is real and evident everywhere and the equally powerful pull away from addressing a troubling text in Matthew about destruction, the end of the world and theology that is concerned with death, judgment, the final destiny of the soul and of humankind. What would you pick?

But this is the beauty of a common lectionary that guides us and gives us a template to follow throughout the year – and it is what we use here in Memorial Church to select our readings for nearly every Sunday of University Public Worship. So you've got to deal with the hand your dealt. There it is - the gospel of Matthew wastes no time on subtleties and gets straight to the point: "Stay awake! Be prepared! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come" are the words with which Jesus greets us on this first Sunday of Advent, the season of preparation. There is an insistence that our first step is to wake up.

As I have read, reflected and consulted with various commentaries for this sermon, that initial wince has given way to a growing insight. This insight comes as a result of seeing that there is no reason that the first part of this gospel text can't be taken seriously. While the rest of it may tilt toward a mysterious future day, it actually remains planted in an ordinary present day. It is a present day that is in fact characterized by uncertainty, by a perplexity that extends even to Jesus.

I would venture to say that we are, much of the time, people who are perplexed and baffled for all sorts of reasons. When you put on top of that the desire to be persons of faith, or at least people who make the effort to understand the teachings of our religious traditions and actually apply them to our lives, it poses problems. It poses problems because people with real faith or religious understanding are not perplexed but clear. Those at least are the assumptions, spoken or unspoken. Even with faith everything is not brought into sharp focus. What God would have us do or decide – much less deal with

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daunting difficulties and ill winds in life – is far from certain. It does not come down to chapter and verse in regard to dealing with the deep complexities of

life, as we know it. This is hard for us to accept because we assume that if we are baffled, then our faith – and us – is flawed and weak.

Texts like these in Matthew, as troubling as they may be, show us that uncertainty is a condition of even the best biblical or religious faith. It does not solve any of the unanswered questions, but it may take the pressure off. It is a relief to know that God does not expect us to know everything.

And so, moving from Thanksgiving and to Advent, we indeed are not expected to know everything, but rather see these verses in Matthew as a call to live and work in a spirit of wakefulness, here and now. Biblical faith as Jesus envisioned is not so obsessed with otherworldly matters that it neglects worldly concerns and what is right before us. Perhaps the Jesus in Matthew today has an eye on what is to come and may suspect that something decisive is going to happen in the future, but nevertheless still keeps focused on the attention of the present day. The text further illuminates that through the illustration of a field, the mill, the daily grind, the ordinary places of human endeavor is where life is lived and experienced. It is in the regions of the mundane where faithfulness happens and is not to be neglected. Religious and biblical faith knows it does not know everything but it still yet is – and thus so are we – a work force in the world.

This season of Advent basks in and holds many great promises, is pregnant with possibility. And in the meantime there are daily disciplines, day-to-day work that requires not only our time but also our intention, which has nothing to do with the busyness that the world imposes on us in this holy season. It calls us beyond and in spite of any uncertainty. Needless to say, without our knowing, God is at work somehow to bring poetic promises to fruition. It has been said that God is not in the business of doing the work of redeciding our life.

And so now what? What is our part in this season of preparation that is sacred, not only secular?

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I promised that I would return to the Advent candles and wreath, which has been used as part of spiritual preparation, adapted by Christians in the Middle Ages. Circular, having no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God,

immortality of the soul, and life eternal. The evergreens can represent continuous life and growth. (move to Advent wreath from pulpit)

To conclude, I want to return to the responsive Psalm we said together at the beginning of our service, which captures in miniature a movement in the life of faith and creates a roadmap, a divine cartography so to speak, that begins and ends in God. When we journey to the heart of God, we become not only God's work force in the world, but we become God's goodness and peace in the world. This is the pilgrimage, the journey of Advent, and because this is the only Sunday in Advent that I will preach, I wanted to get my two – or rather four – cents in as we work our way around this symbolic wreath for the next four weeks. Consider it a meditation if you will as we begin together this holy season that prepares us for a breaking in, a holy expectation of God with, for and among us. Yes, even the skeptics, the cynics, the doubtful, the fearful among us.

Four words emerged for me out of the psalm we said together and I offer now as a way to accompany us around this Advent wreath over the next four weeks:

GRATITUDE: The responsive psalm (Psalm 100) begins by addressing all who live on earth, so here symbolically at this first candle lit today is the notion to “shout out with joy, come with a ringing cry and know that God is a source of wonder” for it awakens gratitude. Gratitude, honor, and thanksgiving are offered to God in recognition of God's wonder and presence in our lives. In this season of Advent, how will we continue to spend time in places here or elsewhere that evoke the joy of God and help us also show gratefulness and openness to wonder?

GRACE: Grace is instilled in us when we remember to whom we belong and remember that “You created us and it is to our Creator we belong” to remind ourselves that others and we cannot possibly know everything. As one of my favorite writers put it: “That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God.”

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GUIDANCE: Whenever we travel, the places we have been leave reminders and we are transformed by their memory. In the presence of God, the psalm

speaks of proverbial “divine gates and holy courtyards,” whose residue is awe and goodness. The psalmist is inspired by heavenly guidance and reminds us to take that awe toward humanity: to pray and work for God’s goodness and kindness for all nations. We then are enjoined to reach beyond our singularity and into concern for others, for the places and people where fulfillment and grace is needed. In doing so, we escape our self-centeredness to experience both our connection to others and our vulnerability.

GOODNESS: Our purpose in every generation, as the psalm concludes, is to become the goodness with which we have been gifted and to return it to others and to the world. When we begin to express our gratitude, live in grace, seek holy and soulful guidance, we begin to care about others, pray and work on their behalf. That work becomes the work of what is good, that which evokes our best selves and becomes work that may in fact shape our world in the hope God has for it.

We must ask ourselves: How will this Advent, this Christmas season be any different than those before? What is needed from me? From us? What is my work, our work in this world?

Each time we approach our Advent pilgrimage anew, we are different, and the end of one journey positions us to begin the next. Our yearly pilgrimage in Advent gives us again an opportunity to reconsider the ways in which we are living our lives. To be alive, alert and awake in that process. I trust that this holy season of Advent will be such for me and for you. Through gratitude, grace, guidance and goodness may we all be reminded that we are always waiting in hope, even in the midst of uncertainty and perplexity. We are called to be light in the world and to work on behalf of God’s reign of justice and peace. Advent is a time of active hope, marked by humility, modesty, faith, trust and mystery. I pray and wish for all of us a blessed Advent season and a meaningful Christmas to come.

Amen.

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