

Poems, Prayers and Promises

First Sunday in Advent

Text: Isaiah 35; Luke 1: 26-31

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

November 27, 2016

Something kept playing in her mind as Advent arrived. Something like a prayer searching for words or a poem reaching for rhyme. Perhaps it was lodged in that place barely beneath speaking as a wondering wish. Or something like this.¹

*I want to hear
a word from God
in an uncertain world this time around.*

*I don't want to hear watered down
easy to follow instructions
whispered from a timid church.*

*I want to hear something real.
Something more. Something hard.
Something Christian.*

*I want to hear
about reckless hope showing up
when human anguish breaks your heart.*

*I want to hear
about stubborn courage standing firm
when fear and fright make much better sense.*

*I want to hear
about choosing compassion for others and sacrifice
when life could be easier passing by.*

*I want to hear
a word from God this time.
But then, I'm not so sure I want to listen.*

That's one Advent soul reaching for what advent does, longing for what advent points toward, stretching to connect with what advent promises to deliver.

Her yearning holds to a poignant desire: "I want a word from God . . . in an uncertain world . . . nothing watered down . . . something real . . . something hard . . . something Christian . . . something about reckless hope and stubborn courage and choosing compassion."

And as I hear her phrases I can't help but wonder. Has it *ever* been so for you as this season of Advent comes home? Has it *never* been so? How close does she get to your story as Bethlehem appears on the horizon?

Frederick Buechner once said: "the story of any one of us, is to some extent, the story of us all." And, I'll tell you: she's got my story hands down and heart open. I want to hear something real, something more, something Christian.

And she's especially got me with this part, I do confess. "I want to hear a word from God . . . nothing watered down. But then, I'm not so sure I want to listen."

My friends that is exactly the eternal paradox of Advent. I want a word from God that I just might not be ready to hear. I tell you this of me, as she tells you this of her; and I wonder of you. Because before Christmas can come in the redemptive cry of a child, Advent has something to ask and tell that can be pretty hard to take in.

Or consider this, a slice deeper. Something played in his mind as Advent arrived, too. Surely it must have taken some form of thought before he wrote it down - unless his feather quill was that stream of consciousness kind of thing where he thought about it only after he had etched it on a scroll and let it sit for a while.

His words are even more penetrating and imaginative. And get this. What came to him to write down, we are told, was from the deep heart of God; God who was trying to get clear on a promise that tomorrow could be better, would be okay; and that the future would deliver restoration and renewal to all that had fallen completely off the track.

*The day will come
and everything
will be wholesome again.*

*The badlands will blossom,
weak hands will be strong,
and feeble knees will be firm!*

*Blind eyes will be opened,
deaf ears unstopped,
and the speechless will sing for joy!*

*A highway shall appear, a Holy Way,
and no one, not even fools
will get lost on it.*

*The redeemed and ransomed
shall return, and sorrow and sighs
will scurry into the night.*

That's another Advent soul pouring out, though separated from us by nearly 2,600 years.ⁱ It's Isaiah bearing God's word to a people sorely waiting for something, Someone, to shake it all up and make it right. Or at the very least to heal the broken and sorry state that had overcome their world. Things were, well, they were simply a mess.

But the truth be told, our world is in a mess these present days, too. We may not be as far away from Isaiah than we think! Near and far, fearful and real, longing outpaces any sense of rest. And the experience of exile can be geographical as it was for Isaiah and his people; or in any number of other ways, as it is for us.

Isaiah names an Advent hunger at the top of his lungs: Things will get better! "The badlands will blossom!" (After visiting South Dakota with our Youth Group last year that would be quite an amazing site to see!) "Weak hands will be strong . . . feeble knees will become firm . . . a way will appear . . . a Holy Way . . . not even fools will get lost on it . . . and sighing and sorrow will scurry away."

Now it may appear to you that today is just an ordinary day in late November. Fair enough. It's only a few days after Thanksgiving, after all, and the leftovers are still warm. And it's still a few weeks before we all gather here in the candled dark of Christmas Eve.

But let's not miss these weeks or pass unknowing. So much more is going on – above and beneath the surface of life, inviting us, waiting for us, calling to us as Advent comes once again. And these poems and prayers and promises, his and hers, of which I have told - have echoed and haunted; cajoled and sung; whispered and cried with deep and urgent truth from the collective heart of humankind in all times and places.

May they do so in each of us, these twenty-nine days ahead - and counting. May they not let us rest. May they rattle us to sleep only to awaken us again. So that this season, this time, the birth of God's love incarnate, this Mystery called Jesus, stands a better chance taking hold of our lives, no less the world. This time around.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel! Amen.

© 2016 Charles Geordie Campbell.

First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

ⁱ Thomas H. Troeger and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale. [A Sermon Workbook](#), 2013, p. 162.