

## When You Come to a Fork in the Advent Road, Take It!

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Mark 1:1-8

November 28, 2021

Advent 1

“When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” That’s the advice of legendary baseball great Yogi Berra. He wasn’t talking about the season of Advent, but he could have been. You see, in the liturgical season of the church, this is the beginning of the New Year -- it's the first Sunday of Advent.

We have come to a fork in the road, in a spiritual sense, and we begin travelling in a different direction. When we look back over our shoulder, we see the season or Pentecost and ordinary time left behind, in liturgical parlance. We look at last year and the old, familiar things of the past. The road has been heavily traveled and very familiar. It is littered with struggles, and some hopes and prayers along the way.

The past year brought us face-to-face with the tragedy and devastation of Covid-19, and its many ramifications. It ravished the world, taking with it too many people while leaving much heartache. But the Jewish people in today’s reading also knew about highways of struggle and hardship.

Many generations had experienced slavery and exile. The road to exile was bitter, and many despaired of ever returning to their homes and temple again. But return they did. It was a different road than they could have imagined. In 538 B.C. the Jewish people were freed by King Cyrus and allowed to leave Babylonia, yet they were discouraged by what seemed like a monumental task of reconstructing Jerusalem and their former way of life – much like the world and our nation are trying to piece together what life and the new normal is going to look like after covid.

For some of the newly freed Jewish captives, they returned home on the same road that led them to slavery years before, yet they saw it with new and fresh eyes. Today, God is asking us to take a different road -- the Advent road – the road less traveled for the next four weeks, as the poet Robert Frost put it. What will that road look like for you?

Our culture travels a very different road this time of year. It’s a frenetic road of consumerism, glitter, “shop ‘til you drop” and a “more is better” attitude. Contrast that to John the Baptist, who proclaimed the coming of Jesus. He is wandering in the wilderness, a wild man with long hair and unshaven, dressed in animal skins, eating locusts and honey, and crying out to the people: “Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand!” he blustered. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

“Has he gone stark, raving mad?” some of the locals wondered. “He should be locked up!” someone declared. “He has lost his senses.” “Obviously he’s had too much to drink!”

But John pointed to a road less traveled. Indeed, he went where often there was no road at all. But whatever you think of John the Wildman, once you catch a glimpse of him, you will never forget him. There is something untamed in him, yet hard to ignore, as evidenced by the people who flocked to the desert wilderness.

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What could be the Advent message in all of this for us? Is God trying to get our attention? If there’s anything positive about growing older and hopefully wiser, it is that God is giving us another opportunity to prepare this Advent season . . . to find our way, to empty ourselves of all that is distracting and peripheral in order that we might more fully experience God at Christmas.

T.S. Eliot captured this essence as he became a Christian later in his own life. He wrote:

“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started,  
And know that place for the first time.”

--T.S. Eliot – The Four Quartets

". . . to know that place for the first time."

Could this be the year to know that place called Christmas as never before? What a gift that would be. What we hope for today and throughout Advent is to notice the ways God is preparing us, tapping us on the shoulder, whispering in our ear.

The word Advent means – “to come.” One thing we hope that God will bring is a new creation -- a new heaven and a new earth . . . a new awareness and resolution to address climate change, and new insights into your life and sense of being.

Perhaps it comes in stages, but Christmas can be an ever-present-reality of the fullness God intends for us -- but we’re not there yet. Advent is the fork in the road that leads to Christmas, and it's "the road less traveled."

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Today we know so much more about the world in which we live, about medicine, outer space, technology and science. But do we know more about God – the God who dwells both within us as well as beyond the galaxies? Have we made progress in a spiritual sense? Are we any closer to God than our ancestors? Do we experience the fullness of

God's presence in our lives everyday? What if we were to try and make our lives a little less hectic and busy during this Advent season?

Everybody I know has a busy and active life, especially at Christmas. It's almost embarrassing for some people to say they are not busy. I once knew a very spiritual fellow who made it a practice to go away for a silent retreat every December! Obviously he was not a pastor!

It probably seemed like a strange thing to many, but maybe he was on to something. When we are busy filling every nook and cranny of our lives, there is no room for new life. There is no room for God. What about emptying some things in your life? Make a space on your calendar and see what happens. Empty your closets and basement and give away some things to people who need them more. Allow some empty space inside yourself.

Contrary to popular culture, Christmas may not be about getting "more," but getting "less." Our family has decided that we are not going to buy and exchange gifts this year. We have everything we need. It is such a joy just to be together again for Christmas for the first time in two years. We may decide to go to a holiday performance instead of buying presents. I find it tremendously liberating and joyful.

As for this season, what is it about waiting during Advent that many find so disagreeable? Waiting is a primary characteristic of Advent. It is not something that most of us relish. We *wait* in lines to purchase groceries; we wait at the doctor's office; we wait to be served at restaurants; we wait in line at the bank; in traffic and at stop signs; we wait to see a movie or play . . . but right now we are waiting for Christmas, and we are waiting for God. We *wait* for flowers to grow and bloom; for babies to be born; for wounds to heal; for bread to rise and wine to age; for children to mature; for friends to call; for love to deepen, we wait for Covid to pass, we wait in line for a vaccine, and long for a "new normal," whatever that may be.

For believers, however, waiting can be redemptive. Waiting can be thought of as spending time with God, and preparing space for the Christ child who is about to come again. Think about that the next time you are standing in the check-out line at the grocery store. It could be the moment when a new awareness of God hits you during Advent. Notice the kindness of a stranger who let's someone go ahead of them in line because they have fewer items in their grocery cart.

Jesus tells us to wait and watch during this season, for we do not know when he will come. Or, he may not come until we are ready. What would that be like? What about living with openness and anticipation to new possibilities right now? What if we were to stop trying to control the outcome of meetings and activities, and allow God to come in God's own time and way? What if we could just wait in the Advent darkness without

being anxious or afraid? We would be practicing the art of Advent, and that is what God intends for us during this season.

I went on an “Advent walk” recently. I usually walk in the mornings, when the sun is up and the day is new. But a week or so ago, I set out with my dog around dusk, and walked our usual path. I wore one of those headlamps, which provided just enough light to see what was ahead. Before long, my eyes adjusted to the darkness, and with the full moon, no other light was needed.

I’ve walked the same path dozens of times before, but this night there was a quiet, magical quality about things. Away from the street lights, the stars shined more brightly. There were not many people or cars to distract. It truly was a “silent night.” The cold air made my breath curl up before my face, bringing a reminder that the breath of the Holy Spirit dwells within. God felt close and present in the holy darkness as I learned the secrets of the night. God works the night shift, too, you know – maybe even more so during the Advent darkness.

Do you hear enchanted music as you step out into the holy darkness? I was reminded of the words from “The Music of the Night” from the Phantom of the Opera:

“Nighttime sharpens, heightens each sensation  
 Darkness stirs and wakes imagination  
 Silently the senses abandon their defenses  
 Helpless to resist the notes I write...  
 For I compose the music of the night.

Slowly, gently, Night unfurls it's Splendor  
 Grasp it, sense it, tremulous and tender  
 Hearing is believing, music is deceiving  
 Hard as lightening, soft as candlelight.  
 Dare you trust the music of the night?

You alone can make my song take flight  
 Help me make the music of the night.”

The God of advent darkness can do that.

On that dark night in Bethlehem long ago, as a special star shone brightly overhead, a few shepherds were watching the skies, but no one else. People went about their business as usual, in their shops, in the market place, in their homes, while God was doing the greatest work right under their noses in the dark.

During these long, dark nights of Advent, how is God preparing you? What is taking place? What is growing in the darkness? Don't push it away. Don't turn a light on too soon. We have this season of Advent to prepare and get ready for what only God knows. So go take a walk in the dark, let your imagination run, and if you come to a fork in the road, take it! It just might be the Advent road that leads to Christmas. Amen

### Zephaniah 3:14-20

3:14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

3:15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

3:16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

3:17 The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing

3:18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

3:19 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

3:20 At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

### Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"--

3 "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "

4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

7 And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."