

Advent: “A Prayerful Pep Talk”

Advent Lessons & Carols ~ November 29, 2020

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Dear Ones, instead of me reflecting on the scripture *after* our hearing of it, I invite you to *approach* the scripture and listen with particular intention.

I am doing this for two reasons:

We have set before us a *feast* of Lessons and Carols, each with some variation on the clarion call of Advent to Wake! Watch! Prepare! These are the spiritual practices of this season: to awaken, to watch, to prepare! (For) God is on the move. The coming of Christ is near. Not the birth of infant Jesus; this is the coming of the cosmic Christ, unbound by time, whereby one and all, past, present and yet to come, shall find ourselves beloved of God, and siblings one to another.

Instead of me *talking about* waking, watching, preparing for this coming, let's practice. This first time through, as we hear the scripture read and the carols sung, let's listen for a word or phrase that captures our attention, a word that speaks to you. Take note of it, so it may become the seed or entry way of prayer for you. Because in addition to what *we've* prepared, I invite you to include ten or more minutes of silence in your Advent worship.

In one form of contemplative prayer, we may use a word or phrase as a mantra, repeating it over and over, allowing the word or words to wend their way in and through us – carrying us, if you will into the presence.

As silent prayer is specially fitting for this season, it may also be the best medicine for this hour. Joshua and I received an email a couple of weeks ago from Chip Somodevilla, one of the conveners of the Father's Group. Chip wrote, “Tonight most of the dads expressed a high level of anxiety about the virus and the affect it is having on all of us. From the uncertainty of what is going to happen

with schools to how the isolation is affecting our kids, the whole group seems to be squeezed by the pressure of the moment. There is little we are in control of these days. For me, this is when it is best to pray. I think it would be helpful if you give us a little prayerful pep talk.” Thank you, Chip, and dads.

We’re spending a lot of energy these days trying to address myriad problems. It helps now and again to gain a different perspective. When our horizon shifts, when we see ourselves, our lives, our challenges from a different, broader perspective, we may find a way where before there was no way. Time in silence in prayer is one way I know to shift our point of reference, to find ourselves anew in the presence of the living, loving God, whose ways are not our ways, are beyond our understanding, and in whose presence today’s landscape of pits and peaks are seen in new light. Our lessons and carols are threshold to that broader horizon.

If you would like an introduction to contemplative prayer, stick around after the postlude and we’ll give it a try.

Now, let’s listen expectantly for the word of God, given, spoken for us:

O come, O come
Rejoice
Be not afraid
In the beginning
As the word became flesh.

Do you have a word or phrase for your prayer? Good. Let’s take it into silence.

I invite you to get comfortable in a chair in which you can sit upright. We intend to pay attention, to watch and prepare.

- Sit forward on your seat so you're not leaning back.

- Plant both feet on the floor. Feel their weight; with your toes, planted to the earth.
- Sit up tall; lift your spine erect.
- But you don't want to be tense. You may. Want to roll your head about on your neck; stretch, get the kinks out. Roll your shoulder back, now forward, then the other shoulder, back, forward. Straighten that spine, pulling upwards.
- Some people like to put their hands face down on their knees.
- Or cup your hands, one in the other, palms upward and receptive, tips of your thumbs just slightly touching. Create a nice rounded circle with your arms, hands and shoulders.
- You can keep your eyes open, if lowered 45 degrees and dimly focused on some point in front of you; otherwise simply close them.
- Now breathe. Inhale a deep breath. Hold it. Breathe out – very slowly. Breathe in deeply, fill your chest, your torso. Hold it. Breathe out, empty your lungs, empty your body cavity. Find your rhythm of deep steady breathing, in, and out.

Follow your breath with your mind's eye as it enters in through your nostrils and fills you. This time, when you fill your lungs with air, pull down, and breathe out through your abdomen, just below your belly. Breathe in through your nose, into your body, down and out through your abdomen, then up and in again, a giant hoop of breath. Always in prayer, we return our attention to the breath, always the breath.

Breath of God. Holy Spirit. In Hebrew, this is *ruach*, the wind that brooded over the deep chaos in the beginning, forming the heavens and the earth, the night and the day, the sea creatures and even we ourselves.

As we focus on our breath, our minds malleable, workable, as the potter's clay.

Now introduce the word or phrase from our Lessons and Carols. Repeat it with each inhale or exhale. Find a rhythm. It will vary, depending on the number of syllables.

In a moment, I will be quiet, that we each may enter the silence.

You may find yourself in silence for two minutes, or ten, or twenty.

As thoughts and distractions arise, which they invariably do – incessantly, let them pass through your mind. You will have an itch, wonder about lunch, hear a noise outside. Don't chase these things away or attach any energy to them at all; note them, let them pass along. Return to your breath, always the breath, and the word or phrase on your lips and in your heart.

At the end, whenever is the end, I like to bow in thanks, recite the Lord's Prayer. Then open my eyes. That's it. And repeat.

So now, let us be still. Let us pray.