

Advent 3, Year C 15 December 2024

Luke 3:7-18

A Sermon by the Rev. Jackie Bullen

I often hear people say how the winter days, the dark days seem to drag on. And that the whole winter period, when it is dark cold and wet, seems to go on forever.

For children I think Advent can seem to go on forever. As a child, opening the doors on my advent calendar, it often felt like Christmas would never get here.

Maybe you too were an impatient child who felt like they lived in Narnia where it was always winter and never Christmas?

Today, the third Sunday in Advent, Gaudete. We remember John the Baptist, and we remember that Gaudete, means rejoice! It always makes me wonder what it might have been like to be John the Baptist. He lived in a kind of perpetual Advent.

His vocation, his calling, was to proclaim the imminent arrival of Jesus. He was a prophet at a time when there hadn't been any prophets for many years in Jewish history.

He himself was prophesied about – those words we heard last week, from Luke's gospel, are quoted from the prophecy of Isaiah – John is the one calling out in the wilderness.

John is the one who called out for people to make the paths straight. A prophet such that Israel had not seen for several hundred years. But this prophet is not an Elijah – telling of the end to all things.

John foretells of a beginning. John prophesies the coming of the Messiah – his own distant cousin Jesus from Nazareth.

John lives in Advent, and kind of never Christmas. But not an Advent that is inactive, sitting, watching and waiting. On the contrary, Jesus refers to him as the one preparing the way (later in Luke's gospel in ch. 7).

However, in his active Advent John is not rushing through to the moment when Jesus will come into his own and carry out his saving work. Like an impatient child wanting to open all the doors on their Advent calendar.

Preparing the way involves a fair amount of hard work, lots of getting on with things, not sitting back and idly hanging around.

Certainly the end of this Advent does not happen for John - he is killed before Jesus fulfils his purpose. But what John does do is the work to which he has been called. In the waiting time he is busy. He prepares the way. Calls people to repentance and asks them to turn away from their sinful nature and turn towards God, making baptism that outward sign of their heart's intent.

He uses the waiting time productively. He lives in the moment. He proclaims his message, spreads the word he has been given. His Advent is not without purpose in and of itself.

There is a book by the theologian Paula Gooder titled 'the meaning is in the waiting' which is a quote from a poem by Malcolm Guite. In this poem the narrator is standing in the stillness of a summer's afternoon in an old church and everything becomes momentarily suspended.

The person knows that God is endlessly present in that very moment and whilst he recognizes it will end and that he will be able to speak of the encounter, the meaning of the moment will be forever lost because it was in the waiting that God gave it meaning.

The meaning was in the waiting for John. The meaning can be in the waiting of Advent for us too.

Advent takes time every year. There is no quicker route through, no shortcut. If we can embrace Advent and the waiting then we can embrace all the darkness around us, and within us too. The brokenness we see, and the brokenness we experience.

And when we get to Christmas, as we will, the light and love that we find there will mean so much more. It will be brighter and bigger. We will recognise how the darkness is swallowed up entirely by God's light. We will experience the restoration of that which was broken. Christmas offers respite for a moment – and Advent is the time to wait and identify what the respite is from.

In our journey through Advent we recognise that God is present here and now, in the present moment as well as in the crib at Christmas.

He is present in the trips we make to the hospital when we visit those who are poorly.

He is present in our preparations for seeing friends and family over the holiday season in a few weeks.

He is present in the ordinary – when we are shopping or cleaning or working or playing.

He is present when we help those in need. When we offer a helping hand.

When we sit with someone who is lonely.

God is present always and in everything.

So, what's the hurry?

We should experience the journey in a real and meaningful way. Because the meaning is indeed in the waiting.

Amen