

ADVENT VISIONS OF JUSTICE

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 1:46-55

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The first Sunday of Advent ... this is where the Christian year begins. You might think it would be with the celebration of Jesus' birth, but it makes all kinds of sense that we begin instead with the anticipation, the preparation, the expectation, the waiting, the reasons, the need. If we don't grapple with why Jesus came, the whole story loses a lot of its power. Christmas may still be a lovely time but we may miss that what we are celebrating is actually a radically amazing thing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us."

"God lays claim to us."

I sometimes think of Advent as a time to recalibrate our lives. To remember God's claim on our lives. To reorient ourselves toward the stupendous event of Jesus' birth and what it means. To look for the light we need so that we can get back on the paths of Christ-like life we have managed to stray from over the past year. To open up again the places in our lives where we have tended to shut Jesus out. And to acknowledge that there is, still, darkness in our world and brokenness in our lives.

Advent is about this distance between what ought to be and what is, between God's claim on us and our resistance, between what we are and what we might be, individually and collectively. Advent is about the distance between our present and God's future ...and about we go about living in this in-between time, how we find hope and strength and compassion.

We don't have to try very hard to see and feel the distance: it's all around us— in the brokenness and conflict and horror and suffering in our world. It's the hope and strength and compassion that are sometimes harder to tap into.

Now, I know that sometimes we don't want to see and feel all that brokenness and conflict and horror and suffering. We just don't want to know. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "I don't listen to the news; it just upsets me" or "I don't really know anything about those issues" or "I don't pay any attention to that stuff; it doesn't affect me." I appreciate that there are times when this may be a healthy choice, but I don't believe this is an appropriate response for people of faith to practice routinely over time.

For one thing, we ought not to forget that we are all connected; many, many seemingly-distant things *DO* in fact affect us all eventually. For another thing, it's a response of privilege. Yes, we *can* choose not to know or not to see. But the millions who are refugees, communities that don't have safe drinking water, victims of violence, children who are hungry

... they don't have the luxury of choosing to not to know. And they are our sisters and brothers; they belong to God and they matter to God.

But more immediately: keeping ourselves disconnected from the brokenness of the world (which is also our brokenness) is a spiritual issue, and, in Advent, an obstacle on our journey to the manger. The whole object of our expectation in this season is God's radical love forging a connection with our broken humanity. The point of Christmas is that God does not turn away from this troubled world – or from us; quite the opposite, in fact. In Jesus, God comes right into the middle of it, as vulnerable as can be to the pain of the world. When we seek Jesus, we find ourselves there, too.

When we let ourselves see, and feel the brokenness, when we are outraged at the unfairness of it all, at the ways in which evil seems to get the upper hand, at the powerlessness and vulnerability we ourselves experience at times,, at the suffering of our sisters and brothers, ... what we are feeling is the Advent longing for justice that we heard in our scripture readings this morning.

Jeremiah and Mary both offer up visions of God's justice which resonate powerfully within this season. For both of them, justice originates with God. In fact, both of them say the same rather striking thing: that God's name is synonymous with justice. Not merely that God desires justice, but that justice is essentially *who God is*. Justice is at the heart of God and is God's intention and ultimate will.

Some might say that this means we can't bring about justice, that it's not our responsibility, that there's no point in trying to do what is impossible. I don't believe that is a legitimate conclusion: following Christ, being the body of Christ, implies participation in the work and purposes of God in the world. One translation of Mary's song begins like this:

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord" In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my Savior."
(CEB)

How can a God whose very name is synonymous with justice be glorified by people indifferent to justice? If our deepest beings are going to be able to rejoice in God, we who are God's will also be, at our core, devoted to justice. If Christ-like-ness is God's intention for us, then justice ought to be synonymous with who we are, too.

So there is in these Advent texts, and in the season's longings, a call for us, too, to be about justice. And the first thing we have to come to grips with is that the justice that Advent leads us to long and seek for isn't "just us." There's no "take care of our own," "America First," "everybody for themselves," in this. God's justice is for all God's children, and the poor and vulnerable – all those who are typically left out of the world's "justice" – are at the center of it.

Justice– isn't something that can ever be abstract. Seeking justice is impossible without seeking understanding. I've observed that people tend to get a lot less judgmental and a lot more compassionate when they get to know a bit more about issues and situations and the way things affect real men and women and children. Advent justice would have us seek to understand the realities of a hurting world – as God does - from the perspective of the poor and the vulnerable. And that makes a difference. When we understand how many people in prison have mental illnesses or were abused children, maybe our attitude toward them becomes a little less punitive and a little more compassionate. The migrant caravan looks a

little different when you know that Honduras is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman. Fires and destructive storms are terrible for everyone in their path, but most devastating for those with the fewest resources.

These are the kinds of realities in our world that Advent justice calls us to understand, no matter how painful they are to hear about.

And some of those realities implicate us in injustice. US arms sales to Saudi Arabia enable the killing of children in Yemen. The churches' silence about sexual misconduct has left thousands of people alienated from their faith. The low prices we love are subsidized by underpaid labor here and abroad. Our eagerness for ever-lower taxes weakens the social safety net. Our culture of consumption wreaks all kinds of havoc on our planet, and the effects fall disproportionately on poor communities. Advent justice demands that we not avoid knowing these things.

During Advent we give in various ways to help people in our community – provide fruit baskets for seniors, buy Angel Tree gifts, donate to Ministry with Community, collect warm winter things for the homeless. Those are good things, needed things, and we should keep doing them. But we shouldn't confuse charity with justice or let those Advent mission projects be the sum total of our concern.

As we give, maybe we should remember that many for seniors in our community, the options for good care are very limited. That probably some of our Angel Tree children have a parent in prison because he or she couldn't afford a good lawyer or was a victim of a discriminatory legal system. That a critical shortage of affordable housing and high eviction rates push many people into homelessness, and that families with children are more likely to be evicted. Advent is the perfect time for us to seek understanding that takes down walls and brings us closer to our sisters and brothers, as in Jesus God came closer to us.

Advent is a time to look deeper... to know the justice at the heart of God's being both as good news and as claim on our lives ...to see how many ways we are connected to one another ... to see our sisters and brothers, to see what God sees ... to seek more understanding ... to repent of our entanglement in injustice ... to acknowledge that we ourselves have been broken by our world and are much in need of grace and healing ... And, finally, to welcome the God whose name is justice, who did not and does not turn away from the world's suffering but *came into it*.

This is a more challenging Advent way than we might wish, I admit. It doesn't start right off the bat with the peace and joy of our idealized Advent. But perhaps it does lead us to a deeper appreciation of incarnation. Here are words, again, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Advent can be celebrated only by those whose souls give them no peace, who know that they are poor and incomplete, and who sense something of the greatness that is supposed to come, before which they can only bow...." Amen.

Resources:

God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Translated by O.C. Dean; Compiled and edited by Jana Riess