



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

## ***Beginner's Mind - The Third Sunday of Advent - 12132020***

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Earlier this week I was in a Zoom chat and it kind of petered out and there was just two of us left. This friend of mine said to me, how is Advent going for you? And I said, "You know, this Advent and Christmas for me is an invitation to develop a beginner's mind." And by that I was speaking about this movement that took place, starting in 1970 with a book called *The Beginner's Mind*, which is about cultivating something that is drawn from Buddhism that made its way into the West.

And this is that you begin to understand and see that what you need to do is to unlearn some of the things that you have taken for granted in your life. To let go of some concepts or let go of some ideas, or step away from the things that you have used, the structure, your opinions and your identity even. To become a beginner again, and to see everything as if you're seeing it for the first time.

And this Advent has been one of those opportunities for me. This is an opportunity for me to step back from all the ways that we have celebrated Advent in the past and to try to imagine what it might be like to observe Advent in this present that we find ourselves. And perhaps, we can faithfully move our way through this present to find some inspiration about the Advent of the future.

As I've been going through these past few weeks and walking with you through these past few weeks, as so many of you have experienced death or disappointment or trial or tribulation, so many of you are experiencing anxiety. I've been thinking a lot about that beginner's mind. A friend of mine published a book that was meant to kind of recreate what it meant to cultivate a beginner's mind. And the title of the book was *Unlearning the Basics*. It was meant to say that you had to somehow strip away and get to the basics again, of what you had believed, and let go of even those and then begin to build them up again. And so I've been thinking about the basics of Advent. And there are really two facets to it.

The first is that advent is a reminder that things will not end by working out of what already is there. Advent doesn't believe that the nature of the universe is

one of teleology, a movement towards an end, which is somehow contained in everything that is in the beginning and is in the process of becoming. Advent is not a moment in which we think that things are going to get better on their own. If only we can hold on and keep on doing what we've done. No, Advent is a rejection of teleology, which is from the Greek *telos* for "end."

Advent tells us that the only way forward for us is through deliverance and rebirth. And advent is the coming of something. It's from the Latin "to come." Advent, to come - *adventum* is the term in Latin. It means that we are powerless to save ourselves. That the kinds of dynamics that we have in place are not enough to make things better, that God has to come again into our midst, and to somehow intervene with a moment of both judgment and forgiveness.

Advent celebrates the first advent of Jesus Christ, who came to us 2000 years ago when he was born in Bethlehem. And we learned, at that time, the fulfillment of the scriptures and the hopes and the longings of the people were found in the moment in which they realized that their salvation would come through a child, when a little child would lead them.

And Advent happens now among us when you or I suddenly find our way to experiencing new birth. When Christ comes into us and comes upon us. When we encounter the power to somehow do things we never thought we could do - things like forgiving, things like loving, things like walking by faith. All of these things, all of these works of faith, hope and love, this is a kind of advent of God on a personal level.

And finally, Advent is the anticipation that the end of this universe will come with Christ coming to us again, it is not we who will somehow evolve into the life eternal. It is Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. And Christ will gather up all things and reconcile them to God. And we all learn burn at that last *adventum*, that last Advent, that last coming of Christ, that the power of God has been vindicated in Jesus Christ. That the covenant that God had with Israel, which God made by swearing by God's self was fulfilled when God came as God's self in Jesus Christ.

And the whole knit of this universe will be understood as somehow contained in the life, death, and resurrection, and coming again of our King Jesus Christ. And the end of all things is not some kind of place that we will find fulfillment alone, but it will be the moment in which we realize that the truth of the matter is that God is with us. Emmanuel, which is Hebrew for "God with us."

So that is the first aspect of unlearning the basics. Everything else we've tried to do to observe this season, everything we've done to try to preserve our identity in this time and place we find ourselves, all of the challenges we have before us, all of these things in some ways can distract us and delay the conversion that God is working in us at this very minute. If only we would stop and wait and

surrender and ask God for the power to come within. And if we would do that, we would experience an *adventum*, like we had never seen before, because God will come and fulfill the promises God has made. And God has promised to be with us.

The second aspect of Advent that is important for us to see is that this rebirth is something that allows us to somehow find the space to grieve. That allows us to somehow see everything as it truly is. To be somehow transformed by the visions that we have before us, without expecting them to be more than what they are. Advent allows us and gives us the courage to stare death in the face, to stare disease in the face, to stare distrust in the face, to recognize that we are insufficient without a stirring up, as we read in our collect, of God's power on earth.

You can see these two moments in a photograph that I put on the bulletin for you today that I'm going to bring up again. This is by Barbara Morgan. It's called Stump. And it was done in 1945, it's a remarkable photo. And Barbara Morgan is one of those photographers that should be as fluent in our cultural language as Ansel Adams. She was an innovator and an incredibly interesting photographer.

And you see, even in this incredible photo of death, a tree that has been cut off, a tree that is dead, you can see a kind of testimony to life. You can see the rings around the trunk, which signified the growth of that tree from year to year. And you see at the center of that tree stump an incredible crack out of which new life will grow.

This is actually a kind of image that is picked up in the cannon of images for Advent. It's one that we sometimes move past quickly. It's from Isaiah Chapter 11, in which we read that out of the stump or the root of Jesse will come new life. Advent is the promise that there will be new life. And you see in this picture, which celebrates and mourns and recognizes death, in the crack in the middle, there is a promise of new life. A kind of womb is being opened up in the tree that will give life to the world.

So you and I are called to be advent people. You and I are called to somehow look at the world around us and look for new birth. You and I are called to somehow realize that God is present even in the midst of death. And this is a kind of rejoicing because when we rejoice, when we have joy, we recognize not a moment of happiness, not a moment of success, not a moment in which we've achieved something, not a moment in which we possess something, but we recognize the presence of another who brings us life. We recognize the reason for which we have been made. Our purpose in life, joy is a kind of birthright of God given to us through Jesus Christ, given through us, given to us through Advent.

So today I want to invite you to enter into one of the imperatives to be joyful in our scriptures for today. From our reading from 1 Thessalonians, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." These are not so much conceptual things that we have to inhabit, but these are the practices that allow us to relearn the basics, to enter again, into the beginner's mind that we are invited to enter today.

Rejoice, always. Remember that God is present with you even in death, that the power of God is available to you whenever you feel fearful, whenever you struggle, whenever you are attacked, whenever you feel limited, whenever you feel you're at a loss, whenever you feel alone, the power of God and the presence of God is always with you, no matter what you face. This is the power and this is the promise that is hidden in the imperative. Rejoice always.

And to pray without ceasing doesn't mean simply adding words upon each other as some kind of mantra, but the imperative and the invocation, the exhortation to pray without ceasing is a kind of reminder to us to be aware of that presence and that power of God, in everything we do. Every threshold we walk through, remember that we are not leaving the presence of God, but coming into the presence of God. And that God has waited for an eternity to have that moment in which you would know God's presence in your life, in which you would have the communion with God that you have through prayer, the conscious contact with God that makes life the wonderful blessing that it is. So pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances, even where we are today, even in the challenges we face, even in the moments in which we least suspect God to show up, the promise of the scriptures, those promises are ours, too.

This reading from 1 Thessalonians, it's an incredible reading because you can imagine the congregation that heard these words for the first time, you can imagine that they were feeling lost and alone when they heard the words "Rejoice always." You can imagine they felt like they could not form a prayer because they had been so traumatized that they could hear that promise to give thanks in all circumstances and to pray without ceasing.

You and I find ourselves again where they are, hearing these words for the first time. Let God's grace open your ears. Let the power of God open your minds and heart. May the God who has come as a surprise as a son, as a child, be born in you today.

Amen.

[End of Recording]