

Sunday, November 29, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Sabbath Keeping”

O Come, O Come, Emanuel

Who is it that we are calling for?

Who is the one that we anticipate?

Is it the “Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory?”

Is it a baby of refugee parents lying in a manger?

What does our Emanuel look like?

Are we waiting for a sovereign power to swoop in and cure all the ills of the world or is Emanuel – *god with us* – here and waiting for us to operationalize our own divine power?

Advent is the season of anticipation. Henri Nouwen reminds us that it is an active waiting – not for the baby, but for the return of Christ. He warns us:

“If we do not wait patiently in expectation for God's coming in glory, we start wandering around, going from one little sensation to another. Our lives get stuffed with newspaper items, television stories, and gossip. Then our minds lose the discipline of discerning between what leads us closer to God and what doesn't, and our hearts gradually lose their spiritual sensitivity.”

Whether we anticipate the incarnation, Christmas, or the eschatological end time, we are living in a period that one author calls the ‘already-but-not-yet.’

We know that there is more to come, but we are not certain what it might be.

Jesus tells us to be alert and to be ready, but we are not entirely sure what we ought to be ready for.

That uncertainty may cause us to feel anxious about the future, however, Jesus is calling us to fully live in each moment, with the expectation that Jesus will show up any minute.

We know that it is fruitless to worry about things that have already happened, burdening ourselves with the baggage of yesterday's problems, but we are not so certain about the future.

Our lesson today from the Hebrew Scriptures assures us that ‘the days are surely coming’ when the Lord's righteousness will prevail.

So, I ask you again, what is it that we are waiting for?

I think we are yearning, longing, for a time when God rules.

It is unlikely that our current systems of rule would be usurped or toppled, however, we do have the power within to succumb to the rule of God.

It is within our power to decide that we will live our lives with God as the ultimate authority.

Just as we will vote to choose our mortal leaders, we can decide to be part of the kingdom ruled by God.

We can make individual choices to participate in society governed by God's law.

Now I am not advocating religious take over of our democratic society, but I am strongly advocating for each one of you, for us, to bow to the rule of God.

This time of year there is so much that wants our attention.

We have parties, gift buying, tree trimming, card writing, special events in our congregations, and the list goes on.

It can be difficult to decide--what gets our full focus and attention and what we ignore.

We can feel overwhelmed with the possibilities.

Our consumer culture bombards us in the Advent season with promises that fullness of life and security can be found in material goods and that our hope comes with a bright red bow attached.

Our focus very easily can stray to those falsehoods.

It seems to be part of our natural human tendency to lose focus on the true provider of life, security and hope: Emanuel-God with us.

We stray from the path with God, we get distracted by shiny objects and enticed by immediate gratification.

We need constant reorientation, we need to remember that our trust and our hope come from God.

To be focused on God is to be truly awake, fully engaged, to "wait all day long" for God.

In the midst of the holiday frenzy, I am going to encourage you to make a commitment to 'sabbath keeping.'

Sabbath keeping values our ability to rest and not merely our ability to work.

Scripture tells us that when God finished creating the heavens and the earth and all their multitude, on the seventh day God rested.

God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

At the end of our Christmas season, I will embark on a one-month sabbatical--an extended Sabbath-keeping.

Roy Olson tells us "Sabbath keeping and sabbatical leave are part of a rhythm of life intended to refresh and renew all of creation so that all of creation will continue to reflect the face and will of God."

In her book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn instructs that Sabbath-keeping includes: *ceasing, resting, embracing and feasting*.

She says “Observing the Sabbath includes not only the freedom from and repentance for, work and worry (ceasing), the renewing of our whole being in grace-based faith (resting), and the intentionality of our choosing and valuing (embracing), but also the fun and festivity of the weekly eschatological party (feasting).”

We can commit to Sabbath-keeping as our Advent practice.

One of the ways that we can reorient ourselves is to develop some intentional practices for Advent.

At last week’s CAUCE retreat at Silver Lake we identified attention to our five senses as an Advent practice that can bring us closer to God.

I want to share some of the ideas with you this morning. This is easy and free!

SMELL AND BREATHE

Go for a walk. Give yourself the gift of breathing. Notice your breath; celebrate the fact that you are alive

Be aware of breathing in life and breathing out what is not life giving.

SEE AND OBSERVE

Find something in nature. Look long at it. Befriend it. See all of its details (size, color, texture) Take a piece of paper and sketch what you see.

HEAR AND LISTEN

Sit very, very quietly. Be still. Listen to all the sounds around you. Listen to all the sounds that are within you.

TASTE AND SAVOR

As you eat your meals, savor every bite. Take time to enjoy all the different flavors. Chew slowly. Be grateful for the gift of nourishment on all levels of your life.

TOUCH AND FEEL

Spend time with your hands. Touch the texture of skin; notice the bumps, ridges, contours; feel the shape and size of your hands. Close your eyes and touch your hands again.

Imagine God holding your hands.

These are simple guidelines for slowing yourself down during this busy season, really anytime.

Pay attention to who you are and how you experience life.

Advent, rather than being a mad dash to Christmas, ought to be a time of moving closer and closer to God.

Advent and Christmas are times when people seem to become more deeply engaged in church and faith traditions.

For example, concert halls are filled to capacity with people wanting to hear lessons and carols.

I often feel that folks have been to so many lessons and carols events prior to Christmas that the worship service on Christmas Eve feels like a stale rerun.

Whatever is on your agenda this season, I encourage you to look for the holiness in each event.

When you go to a concert, or attend a Christmas party, look for evidence of God's presence in the gathering.

Rather than keeping a mental checklist of all the things you need to do for the holidays, try to keep a mental checklist of all the times you witness God's holiness:

The sound of a child singing carols, the beauty of Christmas lights on a dark night, the smell of mulled cider or fresh greens, the taste of a freshly baked Christmas cookie, the feel of the winter cold on your face – all signs of God's presence here and now.

Each time you see holiness, utter a brief prayer of gratitude – a simple 'thank you, God' and your seasonal stress will diminish.