

Sunday, December 6, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Prepare the Way”

In my reading this week I came upon a particularly moving passage from *God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* a collection of writings attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who participated in the German Resistance movement against Nazism.

His involvement in plans by members of the German Military Intelligence Office to assassinate Adolf Hitler resulted in his arrest in April 1943 and his subsequent execution by hanging in April 1945, just days before the war's end.

I want to share his thoughts with you to set the stage for this morning's reflection:

“The lack of mystery in our modern life is our downfall and our poverty.

A human life is worth as much as the respect it holds for the mystery.

We retain the child in us to the extent that we honor the mystery.

Therefore, children have open, wide-awake eyes, because they know that they are surrounded by the mystery.

They are not yet finished with this world; they still don't know how to struggle along and avoid the mystery, as we do.

We destroy the mystery because we sense that here we reach the boundary of our being, because we want to be lord over everything and have it at our disposal, and that's just what we cannot do with the mystery....

Living without mystery means knowing nothing of the mystery of our own life, nothing of the mystery of another person, nothing of the mystery of the world; it means passing over our own hidden qualities and those of others and the world.

It means remaining on the surface, taking the world seriously only to the extent that it can be calculated and exploited, and not going beyond the world of calculation and exploitation.

Living without mystery means not seeing the crucial processes of life at all and even denying them.”

Faith is a mystery.

Love is a mystery.

Joy is a mystery.

God is a mystery.

We simply do not know the answer to how these things find their way into our lives.

We often try to articulate the reasons why we love someone; or why we believe in God, but we really don't know.

These precious gifts that find their way into our hearts make us distinctly human.

This ability to live with mystery – not always needing to know why, is a key to happiness and well-being.

When we struggle to find answers to everything, we rob ourselves of the beauty of mystery.

When we focus on facts alone, we cloud our ability to see potential, to imagine a future.

We have to remember to dream.

God comes to us in our dreams helping us to envision a world where God's peace prevails.

The Christmas season is suffused with mystery.

Much of the joy, and some of the anguish, we feel at this time of year is rooted in the sentimentality of the season's rituals.

We love to hear the story of the angels singing in the sky or the wise men following a star to find the baby Jesus.

The words of Mary and the dreams of Joseph paint a picture of a world where goodness prevails over evil.

The lowly are raised up.

The righteous are rewarded.

We want to live in that world.

We ignore the harshness of the story or we diminish the rituals to mindless, meaningless tasks rather than embracing the beauty of possibility.

We explain away every mystical encounter in our lives with our rational, intelligent analysis without ever wondering whether God might actually be right there waiting for us.

This second week of Advent we focus on John the Baptist, on his message to "Prepare the way".

We can only prepare the way for God to come into our lives if we allow the mystery of that coming to exist.

We can't possibly know when we might encounter God – either in this life or the next – so we must prepare the way.

Much of our lives are spent in reaction to events, people, ideas, and circumstances.

It is hard to slow down, to listen, to wait, to prepare thoroughly for anything, let alone God's coming.

Yet, John's message remains true – God is coming to us and we need to prepare our hearts, and make a way into our lives for God to enter in.

We must not forget how to wonder.

During this Advent season we must wonder what life was like for Mary, a young woman visited by God – not whether or not there is historical evidence of the virgin birth;

We must wonder what it was like for John the Baptist to hear the word of the Lord and begin to preach – not whether he actually wore a loin cloth and ate locusts;

We must wonder about a God that so loved the world that he was willing to send his only son into our midst to save us from ourselves – not whether or not there is proof of God.

We will lose our faith if we abandon the mystery.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer viewed his time in prison as a type of Advent – a waiting to be in full communion with God.

Our lives are such a waiting – not knowing – but waiting, expectantly for the promise of peace and justice to come true.

This past week, once again, we heard stories of violence in our communities.

We wonder where God is as our world seems to careen out of control.

Our Conference Minister, Rev. Kent Siladi, sent us these words in response to the violence in California this week:

“These are difficult days. We feel at a loss in so many ways to know how to respond or what to say or more importantly what to do.

I don't think there are any easy answers but I do have a sense that God is weeping over what is happening in our world.

We are called to be God bearers and Gospel proclaimers in this time.

Our mission and ministry continue to be centered in Gospel hope in the midst of the great despair and violence that surrounds us.

Our witness must be a powerful one of proclaiming love and justice and of working for social change to transform God's world into a more just, loving, compassionate place.

Our witness is critical in these times.

In this season of Advent we wait.

We wait, but our waiting is not a time of inaction.

It is a time to allow our hearts to be broken open once again to the Incarnation of God.

Into the midst of pain and suffering, of warfare and violence, of doubt and derision, God came as a child.

Into our pain and suffering, warfare and violence - God comes again.

This week we hear about John the Baptist, the "wild thing" - proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

That's a very fine way for all of us to prepare this season.

God, forgive us. God, move us to a new way of being. God, help us together to make a difference in Your name."

Reverend Siladi's words remind us that we live in a time when God's message of hope and peace is desperately needed.

We must be the ones to convey that message.

We must carry our light out into the darkness of the world, embracing the mystery of both our own and God's power.

Hear these words of prayer by Eric Anderson:

Holy One, God of Peace, God of Justice, God of Love:

We come to you in penitent confession.

You called us to bear witness to you: To your ways of healing, to your ways of care, to your ways of compassion, to your ways of peace.

This we have not done.

You called us to feed your sheep, to feed your lambs, to feed your children.

This we have not done.

You called us to build a city on a hill, one that could not be hid, where the lion could lie down with the lamb.

This we have not done.

We have seized on reason after reason to equip ourselves for death: for power, for prestige; to equip ourselves with resources or wealth; for pride or for protection; for posturing or for revenge; for creed or state or family or clan or...

We hear these reasons echo hollowly in the dread silence following another rash of killings.

We bow our heads in sorrow and in grief.

Let your mercy unto us, O God, not be a balm for wounded spirits, but drive and energy to change our ways.

As you cried, "Enough of this!" when your disciple lashed out with the sword, may we raise our voices echoing, "Enough!"

As you told your friends that the greatest among them would always be the one who served, may we extend our hearts and hands to all the lonely, all the lost, all the ones who feel they are beyond the bounds of human care.

As you told us that when we do a good (or ill) to any person, we do that good (or ill) to you, may we see in every human being a child of God, one of our family, a bearer of your grace.

Do not comfort us until we make this world a better place.

Let your comfort rather rest upon the wounded, those who lament for loved ones lost, those whose bodies, minds, and spirits face the rocky road of recovery.

Let your comfort rest upon the ones who rushed in to protect, to bandage, or to heal, and may your power restore the souls who suffer from exposure to such trauma.

Let your comfort rest upon the ones who will journey with the wounded, with the grieving, with the suffering, so that they might serve, and serving, know your grace.

Let us - Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, followers of uncounted faiths around the world or adherents of no faith at all - let us, together, reshape our constellation of societies, forsaking the ways of violence and death, embarking on the paths of peace.

Aid us, O God.

Hear now our prayers for those whom we love.

For those who are sick, we pray for healing.

For those who mourn, we pray for comfort.

For those whose lives have lost the ability to wonder, who gaze upon the stars with fear, who lament that God has forgotten them, we pray that your Holy Spirit might find its way to their hearts.

For our brothers and sisters caught in the web of addiction, mental illness, family strife or violence, we pray that they might be saved by our generosity, our gentleness and your grace.