

Happy Advent! We're nearly there, folks. If Advent is a time to get our spiritual house in order to welcome the visiting Christ with our best foot forward, then today is sort of like that moment where you look around, double-check the to-do list, think you've gotten everything done, and put your feet up. But as soon as your tush hits that comfy chair, you remember something else and up you pop. Oh yeah! The tree! The wreaths! That one gift I hid so well I forgot where I put it! Yeah, we're not quite done, but we're close. And soon, soon Christmas Eve will be here, and that'll be a whole thing, and then Christmas Day, and that's another, and then perhaps the most important day of the liturgical calendar: December 26th, St. Stephen's Day. St. Stephen's Day is the day Becca and Fr. Steve and I hide from the world and enjoy our little family Christmas with all the work of the last however long behind us. It's a day to pat ourselves on the back, to breathe easy, and actually occupy those comfy chairs without the worry of another thing popping into mind. But we're not there yet. There's still work to be done, work that not even Sabbath sets aside.

It's tough to anticipate while doing other stuff. I mean, the anticipation sorta pops in when I'm not looking, but there are all these other things that need my attention first. Little steps along the way that pull my mind elsewhere just long enough to look at a calendar and go "I'm sorry, what day is it? How is it already a week until Christmas? What happened to October?" Just one more week, six days, really, until we pack this place out like it's 2019 again. I cannot wait. It's gonna be glorious and weird and a little unfamiliar and I'm guessing there'll be a touch of sad to it, too.

You know, there's a thing I've seen sometimes in churches. We all know this time of year is hard, and we know it brings up some tough memories. Some churches do what's called a Blue Christmas service, "blue" as in sad. It's basically a service set aside to recognize that difficulty of the season, for all the many reasons it is difficult. It's a lovely impulse, but I want to talk about why we don't do one. It's not because I think we should all just smile more and pretend to be happy.

No, I actually think, if we need a Blue Christmas service, it's because we aren't doing our job as a church. Again, I don't mean to say that if we do our job, people won't be sad. Not at all. No, what I mean is, if we don't make space for people to come as they are to every one of our services, we've messed something up. There's room for joy here, but there's room for tears, too. And the entire community is stronger for it. I know, no one wants to get all weepy eyed in public, but if you can't cry before God, where can you? God is with us, so your anger, your fear, your sadness, lay it out in this place, and God will hold you gently. And if we're doing our job right, St. Thomas' will hold you gently, too. Blue Christmas services take that sadness and set it aside in its own space, safe from the over-eager joy of well-meaning Christmas-elves and gruff grinchies, but also separated from the community. It's pulling a limb off the Body of Christ and leaving it to think about what it's done or what's been done to it. Meanwhile, the balm that limb needs is elsewhere, where the rest of the Body gathers.

Let me try to put this all a different way. The anticipation of this season is so great, the songs in the grocery store so catchy and upbeat, the greetings on the sidewalk so happy and merry, that most of us forget to remember how hard it can be to force yourself to anticipate or sing or imagine happy anything when you aren't in that place. And sometimes it's worse than that. Sometimes the happy and the merry turns to salt in brand new or decades old wounds. Real and deep joy comes when we make space for all that complicated life reality. Real and deep joy comes when we skiv over in the pew to make space not just for a new soul fresh out of the snow but for the heaviness they drag in with them. Joy comes for us as we welcome whatever doleful Mary enters our

doors, and joy comes for them when whatever Joseph sits and feels his worry is welcome here as much as that half-smile he hides it behind. No matter how awful things get, here we know, God is with us.

I heard a story last week about Judy Garland and her classic Christmas tune, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” The original lyrics were a bit too sad, she thought, so Ms. Judy Garland had the behind-the-scenes folks rewrite them to be a little less bittersweet and a little more plain-ol’ sweet. She was probably right, and it might be those sweet lyric changes that keep that tune implanted in our minds 80 years later. It’s just the right blend of schmaltz and nostalgia and optimism to fit the snowy, short days of Winter. But the original lyrics, written in the middle of World War II, by the way, the original lyrics actually fit a little better with what I’m getting at. There’s a gentleness to their treatment of sorrow, a longing for better days, an appreciation of joy, and an awareness that the world still ain’t what it ought to be, something we’re keenly aware of after so many years of weird and tragic Christmases. So here’s the original lyrics, and no, I’m not going to sing it. I want you to hear the words. It goes like this, and for those of you that really didn’t want to wet your eyes this Sunday morning, I apologize. We’ll hold you close for God is with us.

“Have yourself a merry little Christmas,
It may be your last.
Next year we may all be living in the past.
No good times like the olden days,
Happy golden days of yore.
Faithful friends who were dear to us,
Will be near to us no more.
But at least we all will be together,
If the Lord allows.
From now on, we'll have to muddle through somehow.
So have yourself a merry little Christmas now.”

In all we love. In all we’ve lost. In all we long to be again, God is with us, Emmanuel.