

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Happy New Year! I know it's a little weird, but you heard me right. Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the New Year in the church's calendar. I'm pretty sure I make this joke just about every First Sunday of Advent, so I'm guessing by now, a few of you are getting tired of what I always say this time of year. Most years, I've talked about how our calendar centers on the sun for Christmas and the moon for Easter. And to get ourselves ready for the many moments of Christ's life that we're going to mark in the coming months, we start the year a little early. There's a lot of sacredness headed our way, and we need a solid foundation to meet that sacredness from. Most years, I'd spend some time talking about penitence right about now, too. I'd talk about how penitence has gotten a bad rap and rightfully so. Too many folks making penitence into a cudgel over the years have ruined the idea for a lot of us. And that's a shame. Because penitence isn't about beating yourself up or having the church weigh you down with guilt. Penitence is about recognizing the ways you can go about living your life and moving in this world a little better. No one flinches at the idea of a New Year's Resolution in the secular calendar. But in the church calendar, we get all hinky about it. Most years, I'd try to make the whole idea of penitence a little more palatable by comparing the process of penitence to getting your home ready to welcome a guest. We all have some dust bunnies piling up in a corner of the living room. Or maybe there's that embarrassing spider web clinging to the window frame - the web isn't all that bad, the spider's doing you a favor with all those bugs, but the husks piling up on the sill underneath have gotten a little gross. You know your guest is coming sometime after they get off work, maybe, but you don't know exactly when, so best get ready now.

And that's the idea behind Advent. You take some time now to get the place ready, to get you ready. But like some great cosmic plumber, we know he's coming, we just don't know exactly when. So we tidy ourselves up now. We start our resolutions a month ahead of his ETA, and by the time the time arrives, we're ready to put our best foot forward, hopefully a little wiser, a little better, a little more present than the last time around. All that's what I would say most years. Shoot, all that's what I have said most years. But this year feels a little different. We just hosted some family from Arkansas, my sister and her two kids, and we did a crash clean of the house, getting at stubborn baseboard lint and even scrubbing the leaves of a houseplant to get 'em all shiny and pest-free. It was a great visit.

But I noticed something kind of cool this time around. See, I spent so much time scrubbing and vacuuming and hiding homeless junk in closets that when they got here, I was actually able to be completely with them. No dust bunny distractions rolling across the carpet, no worry that they'd see the spot in the sink that had been annoying me but not enough to actually do anything about it, just 100% there with them in the space I'd made ready. That was great. But after we dropped them off at the airport and made our way back home, there was a different kind of cleaning that needed to happen. By the way, to my sister Lara, if you are reading this, I love you dearly. Your kids are great, you're awesome, and this is not meant to be a dig on you; it's just the reality of guests.

There was a different kind of cleaning that had to happen this year, and wouldn't you know it, this cleaning came right on the eve of Advent. So, of course, I couldn't help but make the connection. This year, in addition to getting the house ready to welcome company, we've had to do some tidying up to set the house back after the company left. Of course, we had to strip the beds and wash some linens. There were extra towels and washcloths to go through the laundry. Furniture needed to be rearranged, floors needed to be swept, and re-swept. The dining room table got a couple of passes of wood soap. And Rosie the Robot Vacuum has been

running pretty much nonstop. Even the dogs are recovering from these wonderful guests, passed out for days since their departure.

All that to say, in years past when I've talked about Advent, I've spent so much time focusing on the preparation for the coming of Jesus. And then when Christmas comes, I've spent a lot of energy focusing on the much-anticipated arrival. But I've almost never talked about what happens after, when the dust settles, when the guests leave, when you return home to a strangely empty house and tidy up not with anticipation but with an acute sense of absence, a mourning not what never was but what was and has since gone. There's an immense gratitude, a fullness even, but also a bit of anguish. Clearing the sheets to get a bed ready for a loved one, that's exciting! My sister's gonna sleep here! How can I make this just right for her? But clearing the sheets after they're gone? With a full heart and an empty guestroom, there's a sadness there. My sister slept here, and in the middle of the night, her daughter crept through the dark house tracing the turns of 200-year old architecture with her hand just to sneak into the room and crawl into the safety of her mom's bed. And now, we strip all that away and wash out their memory not in anticipation of anyone so much as just putting things back the way they were before the visit even happened. And that's where I'm entering Advent, with a question about this new year, this new season, this new Christmas on the horizon and this new Easter moon already waxing in the distance.

How many years have I prepared for the coming of Christ only to set things back to how they used to be after the stable, the young mother, the silent father have come and gone? How many cycles through these readings, how many candles lit, how many blue robes and Silent Nights and poinsettia giveaways have I actually made space to change me? I suppose part of the mystery of all this is the ways we are changed by these sorts of rhythms and encounters without really knowing we've been changed. But what I'm getting at is a little different. I think I've been hyper-focused on tidying up my soul in order to create the most welcoming vessel possible, and that's not altogether a bad thing. But I've been focused on the front end, the first embrace, the tour of the house, the "here's where you can find snacks in the middle of the night" part. And this year, I'm more curious about the "ok, now what," parts. The "now that you're here and know where everything is, now what," part. The "we've run out of things to show you and it's time to just sit" part. The "we've all finally gotten comfortable enough to put our best foot back where it belongs and just be with each other" part. Even the "driving away from the airport with the guests boarding their plane" part.

What happens now? When the anticipation of the big event is done, what fills the calm that follows? What do we turn our excitement toward next? After all the tidying and resetting and catch-up snoozing is done, what do we anticipate coming into our lives the next time, and how do we make ourselves ready for that? We are certainly changed by the last encounter, but how remains a mystery. So, if I have an Advent New Year's Resolution, I suppose it's just that. To anticipate the other side of the excitement, to prepare for the life that waits on the far side of miracle, maybe even to listen for the call of how we will be changed. I have no idea what that looks like, the calm after the storm, but I'm excited and I can't wait. But as the calendar moves and Christ comes in his own time, wait we must.