

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent: John 1:6-8, 19-28

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Well, folks, I've got good news and bad news. The good news is, Christmas is a week away! The bad news is, Christmas is a week away. Don't get me wrong, the birth of Christ and the arrival of the Messiah is a wonderful thing. I love all the shepherds and scary angels and drummer boys. Doesn't get more nostalgic than that. That's part of the reason I love this little bubble of Hamilton. This time of year, it's like living in a Hallmark movie, complete with just the right amount of schmaltz. But also, Christmas is a crazy time. The weather's unpredictable, snow tires are expensive, gifts are expensive, plane tickets and a full tank of gas are expensive. Every place you like to shop is either super crowded or closed for the season. Other drivers lose their ever-lovin' minds while I, of course, drive perfectly. Best laid plans fall apart, old family arguments flair up, even older personal baggage bubbles to the surface. And we react from places we don't normally, sometimes unreasonably cheery and sometimes unrecognizably snippy. Old temptations roar back to life, meanness creeps in, and for some reason we think that's the perfect opportunity to get everyone together for some quality family time / forced family imprisonment. Y'all, think about this for a second, while all other parts of our psyches go haywire, we choose -- WE CHOOSE! -- to cram into a single-family home and share a bathroom!

I love Christmas. I really do, but man is it tough in a whole lot of totally predictable yet unexpected ways. On top of that, Advent is my favorite season of the church year. I think I say that about all the seasons, but with Advent I really mean it. Advent's all about preparation. And as a preparer, I'm in my zone. Thing is, I don't wait well. Becca could tell you that. If we're going somewhere at, let's say 5:00, if we're going somewhere at 5:00, and I mess up my timing and get ready ten minutes before it's time to leave, I'm in some kinda state. It's too long to do nothing, but it's not long enough to do something, so I get to pacing completely unaware of what I'm doing. Becca has to sorta break through my self-hypnosis and remind me that sitting down is, in fact, an option. Nope, I don't wait well. I do prepare well. Sitting still and doing nothing isn't in my nature. I'll take a task over that any day. I've tried making it a discipline to practice waiting, and let me tell you, I don't like it one bit. Truth be told, I don't like it one bit, until I do it, and ya know what? It's kinda great.

There's an old line that says, "Don't just do something, stand there!" That's some hard wisdom to absorb. But it's right in line with my favorite prayer in the whole wide Book of Common Prayer, which has this great riff: "If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly." There's this much needed permission to slow down. That good ol' fashioned Protestant Work Ethic is so ingrained that I'm more likely to work until my callouses get callouses than to sit down and take a breather. I need this kind of reminder year round, but I especially need it now. I suspect all of us need it now. The whirlwind has us caught up in all sorts of beautiful and difficult ways, and my Lord what an incredibly counter-cultural statement it is, especially this week, to even imagine doing nothing. It's almost laughably unattainable. Which is exactly why I love it. "Nothing" is so out of reach that it's ridiculous. So, we prepare.

I tend to think about this season being all about looking toward Christ entering the world. We hold the dual meanings of Advent in tension waiting for that beautiful baby in the manger and that returning god-man to set his Kingdom in place and right the wrongs of the world. I focus on the things to come, the things we're preparing for. But it occurs to me this year that, by looking ahead, I've been missing the preparers that're here right now. I leapfrog John the Baptist and go straight to the good stuff. But that's a disservice to John, and it might be a disservice to all of us, too. Looking ahead that intensely, it's easy to miss the beautiful, sometimes frantic preparations happening right now. It's even easier to miss the sacredness in that preparation. It's almost like we're back with Mary and Martha trying to decide who has the better part. Martha's diligence matters and it allows Mary space to sit at Jesus' feet. Us, too. I've lost track of how long Dianne and the choir have been

preparing for next Sunday. This place transforms from a simple country church to a postcard-perfect sanctuary. I'm writing ahead. The bulletins are coming together. The all-in-one printer/copier/scanner/rocket ship is in good health. Brand new crayons appeared overnight, folding chairs will make their way in, the furnaces blow warm, and even the organ gets a tune-up. Presents get bought, stores get shopped, restaurants change their menus, airlines up their fees, everybody's getting ready, preparing the way for someone. Shoot, even salt on sidewalks prepares the way! All that to say, while we wait, or more likely, while we run around trying to get everything ready for the coming sacredness of Jesus, it's so easy to lose sight of the sacredness in what we're doing now. We're a whole lot of John the Baptists. I mean, we're not dunking folks in rivers willy nilly, it's too dang cold for that. But we do prepare. Fresh sheets and towels for guests, one of everybody's favorite pie rotating through the oven, last minute emergency trips to Syracuse for, I don't know, whatever it is folks go to Syracuse for. It's all sacred because it's all preparing for the coming of Christ. And it makes space for our guests to sit at Jesus' feet.

Now, there's a chunk of our theology that says we are all part of the same Body, that globe-encompassing Body of Christ. If that's true, then we welcome family, friends, students left here over break, strangers on the street, whoever, when we welcome them, we really do welcome Christ's Body. If the welcome itself is sacred, then the getting ready to welcome must be too. Prepare like John and welcome Jesus. As if we needed more weight on the season, but there you are. I hadn't really made this connection before, and it feels obvious now, like I should've thought of this sooner, but I guess I've been so caught up in preparing that I've missed it every other year. The preparation was necessary, but that's as far as my brain went. Obvious as it might be, I'm glad it's clicked. 'Cause it makes all my running around and frustration and checklists sacred. Good. But. Much as I love recognizing the sacred in something I already do, that doesn't necessarily mean it's the only way. It's easy for me to be busy and to prepare. It's really hard for me to be still, and it's even harder to wait. I can buzz around, flutter from one mint on a pillow to the next, but just waiting? C'mon. "If I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly." Ha. It is a beautiful line, but I can't help but feel a little insulted by that prayer. Like, it's just sitting there on page 461 judging me. I know, that's silly, but I can't help it. Much as I love Advent, it's tough to hit the right balance with too much preparation on one side and too much stillness on the other. I don't know if this is helpful for y'all, but the dual natures of Advent, the coming baby and the returning king, these dual natures make space for both sides. Frantic movement and stillness both have their place this season. Standing up at Destiny Mall requires bravery, and holding my temper in the parking lot has gotta be grounds for sainthood. But sitting still and waiting requires a part of my heart I guard overly much. There's a vulnerability to stillness and silence that's scary. It's scary because when I stop moving, I'm reminded of myself, my worries, my world, and all that takes me to a place I don't wanna go. Which might be exactly why I need to go there, and why going there, as the prayer has it, gets done gallantly.

I know there's a lot going on in the lead up to Christmas. There always is. And I know telling folks to slow down and savor the season sometimes feels out of touch. And I also know we're all carrying a million new stresses and a billion old ones this time of year. And that's exactly why we've gotta temper our preparation with the occasional sit down. The preparations help us welcome and make our celebrations and love our people. But the occasional stillness might just get us to those people alive, peaceful, and a whole heckuva lot kinder. And it might make everything a little more sacred. It's another dual nature: we prepare to welcome guests and the Christ they bring with them.

"This is another day, O Lord. We know not what it will bring forth but make us ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If we are to stand up, help us to stand bravely. If we are to sit still, help us to sit quietly. If we are to lie low, help us to do it patiently. And if we are to do nothing, let us do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give us the Spirit of Jesus. Amen."