

Stef Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Stef Grossano:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here at Appleton Chapel. I will be our speaker this morning, and our service will begin with a responsive reading of Psalm 139. Please rise in body or spirit as we read the Psalm responsively by whole verses.

O Lord, You have searched me and known me.

Congregation:

You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away.

Stef Grossano:

You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

Congregation:

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, You know it completely.

Stef Grossano:

You hem me in, behind and before, and You lay Your hand upon me.

Congregation:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is so high and I cannot attain it.

Stef Grossano:

Where can I go from Your Spirit or where shall I flee from Your presence?

Congregation:

If I ascend to heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.

Stef Grossano:

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea...

Congregation:

Even there, Your hand shall lead me and Your right hand shall hold me fast.

Stef Grossano:

If I say, surely, the darkness shall cover me and the light around me become night...

Congregation:

Even the darkness is not dark to You. The night is as bright as the day for darkness is as light to You.

Choir:

(singing)

Stef Grossano:

The Advent season is a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Not everyone can wait. Neither the sated nor the satisfied nor those without respect can wait. The only ones who can wait are people who carry restlessness around with them, people who look up with reverence to the greatest in the world. Thus, Advent can be celebrated only by those souls who give them no peace, who know that they are poor and incomplete and who sense something of the greatness that is supposed to come. Then, just as everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all of our ideas are wrong. Our eyes are at fault. That is all. God is in the manger. Wealth is in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment.

These are excerpts from letters that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century German Lutheran theologian, wrote to his parents and his fiancée in 1943 while he was incarcerated in a German prison for his participation in the resistance against Nazism.

When I was given this date to speak at Morning Prayers, since it was the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, I assumed that this past Sunday would be the start of Advent as it often is on some calendar years, and so I planned to talk about this season in the Christian liturgical calendar that remembers the first coming of Christ and anticipates the next. Well, it turns out that Advent starts next Sunday, but since this is a season of waiting, I hope that you'll excuse me talking about it in anticipation.

In the Catholic mass, the tradition that I grew up in, the priest prays a prayer after the Lord's Prayer, and this ends with, "As we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ." "Wait in joyful hope," this is how Advent has always been described to me, but waiting and hoping, especially waiting and hoping joyfully, seem like strange dictates to me especially in this moment that continues to feel urgent, tenuous, even dire with a truce in Israel Palestine, with three young Palestinians wounded in Vermont, with our world leaders deliberating the future of our climate in Dubai.

This has been my contention with Advent hope. Its passivity seems impotent, its far away-ness seems empty, but when I read the words of Bonhoeffer, someone who knows something about living through an urgent moment, and when I read more about the history of Advent in the Early Church, I realized that Advent hope might be something else.

Father Richard Rohr, in a reflection on Advent, explains that the Early Church didn't celebrate Christmas, let alone Advent. Easter, the memorial of Jesus' death and the celebration of His resurrection was the apex of the Christian calendar. It wasn't until the 13th century that the church celebrated the feast of Christmas, and it was because St. Francis had an insight. He based this feast day on the insight that the problem that Jesus' death seems to solve, the problem of human sinfulness, was actually solved from the beginning with Jesus coming into the world and, in doing so, sanctifying the human form. It was solved by Jesus' incarnation, which is to say the freeing, the incarnation of love.

What if Advent hope is the possibility that, because God did, we can incarnate, embody, make real our love for one another? What if hope is less of a noun and more of a verb? What if it's something we do with and for one another? When we can do hope, suddenly, hope is a little bit closer, but what is hope for people who are physically or emotionally bound by their circumstances or by despair like Bonhoeffer writing from a German prison?

Before I came to graduate school, I worked with incarcerated students who were getting their high school and college degrees and, on the end-of-year surveys that we would give them, they would always list "hope" as a program outcome. Hope in what or for what? They didn't specify, but perhaps it was through their hard work and through our presence that they were able to imagine a world where they were more than prisoners, where they were students, where they were worthy, where they were free.

Bonhoeffer tells us that Advent can only be celebrated by those who carry restlessness around with them. It is our imaginations that incite our restlessness, give us no peace, tell us something of the greatness that is supposed to come.

Practical theologian Yara Gonzalez-Justiniano says that hope is the idea that reality is not the exhaustion of all possibilities. How would we know that our possibilities have not been exhausted? If we cannot imagine otherwise. Like Bonhoeffer says, "Our eyes are at fault. That is all."

What if the Advent season is a moment to refresh our imaginations, to take in the Christmas image where God is in the manger, wealth is in poverty, life is in darkness, where there is comfort and abandonment and to use that as fodder for our imaginations, for imagining and working towards the new heaven and the new earth? Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Stef Grossano:

Please rise in body or spirit and let us pray.

Fulfillment of our hope, stir in our hearts a restlessness for a world incarnate with Your love. Refresh our imaginations and strengthen our hearts that we might embody Your hope for one another.

Together, let us pray the Lord's Prayer.

Congregation:

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Stef Grossano:

Now, let us sing Hymn 273.

Congregation:

(singing)

Stef Grossano:

As we go into this day, let us remember that, in the goodness of God, we were born into this world. By the grace of God, we have been kept all the daylong even onto this very hour and, by the love of God, we are being made full. Go in peace. Amen.

Congregation:

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Amen.