

Rejoice & Resist: A Sermon for Advent Four
Sunday, December 24, 2023, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

On this Fourth Sunday in Advent,
we light the final candle on the wreath
that has marked our time of preparation for Christmas –
the annual celebration of
the mystical longing of the creature for the creator –
the finite for the infinite --
the human for the divine –
all wrapped up in swaddling clothes
and lying in a manger.

As we light the fourth candle – the “love” candle
we prepare to wonder again
at the power of a love so great that it would
triumph even over death ...
a love that came down at Christmas
incarnate in the One who loved us enough to become one of us
in order to show us how to love one another.

And many of us wonder as well:
how can it possibly be Christmas again already?

That final wondering is all the more present this year
when we have the unfortunate calendar karma
of the Fourth Sunday of Advent falling on Christmas Eve Day ...
which means as we gather here in this sacred space
with lessons and hymns and reflections
on the gifts of waiting and preparation,
we do so with Christmas literally in the wings
waiting for its cue to take center stage ...
not in a few days but in about four hours!

Tick Tock Baby Jesus!

We may or may not be ready –
but like any other baby about to enter this realm
when the time has come the time has come ...
and the time is almost here,
my brothers and sisters and gender fluid siblings

to shift from “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” to “Joy to the World.”

But we’re not *quite* there yet. Christmas is still in the wings as we pause for this last little bit of Advent.

And as we pause to gather as this faithful remnant on this Sunday morning in this Centennial Year, we recognize that *as* we gather in this sacred space – in this thin place in this sanctuary we call All Saints Church on this corner of Walnut and Euclid where the faithful have gathered in this very room for 100 years of Christmas celebrations – we join the generations of those who have lit the candles, said the prayers, sung the hymns and maybe even listened to the sermons – that call us to dwell for just a little longer in that Advent both/and place of the not yet and the already.

Of the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven that dwells in us and is yet to be realized in this realm.

Of the Good News of the Prince of Peace coming into a world torn by War.

All of these both/ands point to the truth Madeline L’Engle penned in her poem “First Coming”-- which is as true today as it was when she wrote it in the 1980’s:

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

Rejoice.

For many of us, that’s a tall order in a year, in a moment, in a world, in a nation that far too often feels the exact opposite of sane ... where we are bombarded with what my father used to call “news of fresh disasters” as innocents are slaughtered in a war that rages on in the land where shepherds watched their flocks by night; as gun violence continues unabated, hatred and polarization reach epidemic proportions,

and refugees seeking sanctuary find no room at the inn at our border
while fascism rears its ugly head in a nation aspirationally dedicated
to the proposition that all people are created equal.

Nevertheless, we light the candle and we claim the promise –
because we are hardwired to live with the both/and –
the not yet and the already –
to live into the non-binary truth of Advent
that grief and pain can co-exist with love and joy –
and that the incarnation of that truth is once again about to come among us
as that baby born of our sister Mary:
the Word become flesh to show us how to live in a broken world
as if the kingdom God has already come --
as if the love of God is greater than anything that challenges it.

And how do we do that seemingly impossible task?
Imperfectly.
Haltingly.
Sometimes begrudgingly.
But most importantly we do it together.
We do it together as community.
We do it as the Body of Christ
living out the peace, hope, joy and love of the Advent candles
not just during the run-up to Christmas but all year long.

And here at All Saints Church
we do it holding in tension two of the core values
we both claim and proclaim: **Joyful Spirituality and Courageous Justice.**

And so – with apologies to Madeline L'Engle – I want to suggest a slight reframe of her words
for this Fourth Sunday of Advent in the Year of Our Lord 2023:

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: **Rejoice! Resist!***

Most of you are familiar with the blessing
I customarily offer when it's my turn to offer the blessing
at the end of the service. It is one I inherited from Bishop John Shelby Spong
via one of my mentors the Reverend Liz Habecker:

*Send us anywhere you have us go, only go there with us.
Place upon us any burden you desire, only stand by us to sustain us.*

*Break any tie that binds us, except the tie that binds us to you.
And the blessing of God – creating, redeeming and sustaining
Be with you – those you love, serve and resist – this day and always.*

I love it because it not only calls me – calls us –
out of our comfort zone but reminds me – reminds us –
to hold always in tension the powerful truth
that this love of God we strive to live out in the world
is broader and wider than tribe, nation, dogma, doctrine,
race, creed, gender, identity or orientation.

And it calls me – calls us –
to never lose sight of the humanity of those whose actions we resist –
to never resort to becoming the evil we deplore –
to be the bridge builders, the boundary crossers and the breach repairers
striving with God to make the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven
not just a prayer we pray but a reality we live.

That is the work we have been given to do.
We are the people we have been given to do it together.
And this is table we have been given
to be fed by the bread and wine make holy
to nurture and fuel us for both the challenge and the opportunity
of living out the Gospel in our beautiful and broken world.

I want to close this morning with these words from Steven Charleston –
a Bishop of the Episcopal Church and an elder of the Choctaw Nation:
words that summarize for me the both/and
of what we are up against in this moment in our community, our nation and our world
and of the power that is behind us as we lean into the work ahead:

*Trust is hard to come by these days.
Suspicion, on the other hand, is abundant.
We must not look away from that reality.
It defines the scope of our challenge.
We must reverse the trend.
We must generate stable alliances of trust
while creating a transparency
that minimizes levels of suspicion.*

*Hard times are not a time to close our eyes,
but to open them to a brighter possibility.*

*So let us be bold in our witness,
for the time of change is upon us,
and the dreams of many hang in the balance.*

*Let us be clear in what we say,
for there are uncounted numbers listening,
waiting for just such a message
as we ourselves have been given.*

*Let us be transparent:
we are agents of love,
workers for peace,
stewards of the Earth,
and members of a community of seekers,
united in respect and diverse in opinion
[by the indestructible power
of God's inexhaustible love.]*

And so as we prepare to go forth this morning:
As we turn the corner from Advent preparation
to Christmas celebration:
May we be given the grace to move forward in faith
as rejoicers and resisters,
as agents of love and workers for peace,
as outward and visible signs
to a weary world in desperate need of
that indestructible power
of God's inexhaustible love.

**So let us be bold in our witness,
for the time of change is upon us,
and the dreams of many hang in the balance.**

Won't you pray with me:

*O come, Desire of nations, bind
in one the hearts of humankind;
bid thou our sad divisions cease,
and be thyself our King of Peace.
Rejoice, Rejoice.
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

Amen.