

**The Both/And of Advent**  
**Advent IV Sunday, December 22, 2024, 10:00 a.m.**  
**All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Susan Russell**

I've confessed before from this pulpit that Advent has always been one of my favorite seasons in the liturgical year. What's not to like about a season that is only four weeks long, where we get to wear blue and there's Baby Jesus at the end of it?

And as much as I've loved Advent over my now many years in the church, I don't think I can remember a year when it has lived up as fully to the adage "time flies when you're having Advent" as it has this year – for here we are already ... all four candles glowing on the wreath and Christmas just around the corner.

And as we light that fourth candle this morning – the candle of love – I want to begin by recalling the words of the late theologian and mystic, Howard Thurman – who famously wrote that for him the Advent candles represent:

- joy despite sadness,
- hope where despair keeps watch
- courage for fears ever present
- peace for tempest-tossed days
- grace to ease heavy burdens
- love to inspire all our living

For me, Thurman's words put flesh on the bones on the "**both/andness**" of these Advent candles which shine in the gloom which surrounds us – lit in anticipation of Christmas – and with prayers that they might burn in our hearts all year long to keep us ready.

To keep us ready. To inspire ALL our living.

For I love the idea that Advent isn't just a time of preparation for Christmas – but for a way of living in preparation for life's challenges which don't miraculously disappear at the end of four weeks of blue with Baby Jesus at the end. At least they don't in my life. And I suspect the same is true in yours.

Which is why we are called to be ready. To keep our lamps trimmed and burning.  
To live with both expectation and anticipation of the kingdom God not quite here but yet within and among us.

To hold in tension the **endings and beginnings** which are the quintessential themes of Advent.  
To stay awake – what some would call "woke" not as an insult – to the ongoing inbreaking of God's love, justice and compassion continually coming into the world – awake and prepared for the ongoing call to action as we walk in love forward into God's future –

continuing ... as our baptismal promise frames it ... to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

And so this morning I want to tell you about four candles that I have seen glowing in the darkness that surrounds us. They aren't candles on a wreath in a sanctuary – they are candles of action in the struggle.

- The first was a **Candle of Healing & Hope** in an email
  - Earlier this month I was invited to be part of a TikTok puppet video series called “Ask the Rev” and responded to the question from one of the puppets about what the Episcopal Church believes about marriage.
  - Of course my answer included that we believe marriage is a vocation for ANY two people who feel called to live happily ever after together until death do they part and ask the church's blessing on their love ... which will not come as a surprise to anyone in the All Saints community.

It got over 72K views and a number of predictable attacks from folks who wanted to know what Bible I read and reminding me that if I persisted in heresy I would burn in the Lake of Fire. But that's par for the course. And it also inspired this email:

Dear Reverend Russell,

I recently came across your video about marriage on TikTok and found it profoundly healing. Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Luis and I live in Colombia. I am a Catholic, and my faith is something I hold very close to my heart. However, I have experienced rejection from my local clergy due to my homosexuality, which has been a source of deep pain and confusion. Thank you for the work you and your church does and the hope you bring to so many. God bless you all.

- The second was a **Candle of Resistance & Rebooting** in a diocesan meeting
  - Sacred Resistance Rebooting:
    - Q. What is “sacred resistance?”
    - A. One of the core promises of our baptismal covenant is to “persevere in resisting evil.” We understand that as a call to stand in resistance to the systemic evils that oppress and marginalize any member of our human family – including but not limited to racism, sexism, nativism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Grounded in our baptismal promises, our resistance to public policies that perpetuate those evils is how we put our faith into action in the world.
  - Resistance is one of the ways we live out the words from the Prophet Micah this morning:
    - *And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.*
  - Peace for **all** people – not just some people.

- *“Reconciliation is holy work. Resistance is too. When the agendas of elected officials scapegoat people of color and Muslims, deprive our fellow citizens of control over their lives, loves and bodies, desecrate God’s creation or enrich the wealthy at the expense of the poor, we must oppose them. This is not a partisan political statement; it is a confession of faith.” – Gay Jennings*
- The third was a **Candle of Resilience & Repair** in an after church forum
  - Resilience in the All Saints community as 78 people gathered in the Guild Room for truth telling about and exploring what reparations look like for the damage done by unexamined privilege and systemic racism.
  - We gathered for the hard, long haul work of listening across differences, hearing each other into speech, truth telling, reconciliation and reparations ... work that transcends the tenure of any rector or priest in charge, the term of any vestry or staff member
  - It is the work we have ALL been called to do ... it is work that has been for too long delayed in the doing ... and – if we’re honest about it – it is work that will not be finished in our lifetimes.
  - Nevertheless, we persist.
  - And in the year ahead we will persist together – with God’s help and with the leadership of a growing team of good people of deep faith who are committed to the aspirational goal of moving beyond inclusion to celebration of every single member of the human family.
- The Fourth was a **Candle of Compassion & Care** on the quad lawn
  - “Do you need a warmer coat?” was the question the volunteer asked of the visitor to the food table on a chilly Sunday morning.
  - Over 200 coats given to under-resourced and unhoused neighbors
  - On this fourth Sunday in Advent – with Christmas just around the corner – we prepare to celebrate again the arrival of the one who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another
  - And the both/and of that celebration is that that love is already here – already among and within us – already
  - It is the love that leaves nobody out, draws everyone in and is good news for all people
  - And it is a message antithetical to the one being proclaimed by those hijacking the Good News of God’s inclusive love in the service of Christian Nationalism
  - For the Love we proclaim lives itself out by putting into action the words of the Magnificat which our sister Mary proclaimed in today’s gospel:
    - Casting the mighty from their thrones and
    - scattering the proud in their conceit
    - as we participate in the struggle against empire and oppression which is as old as Roman occupation and domination in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and as current as the headlines of the rise of global oligarchies in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

All of these **both/ands of Advent** 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 ... the candles burning on the wreath notwithstanding ... 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 hope, peace, joy and love of the Advent candles not just during the run-up to Christmas but all year long as we gather around this table to feed by the bread and wine made holy and then go out into the world as beacons of God's love, justice and compassion.

That is the work we have been called to do, equipped to do and empowered to do: To witness to the light coming into the world we will celebrate in a few short days in our Christmas celebrations and then take out into the new year ahead ... in a time when that witness has never been more essential. So -- in the words of our brother, Bishop Steven Charleston:

*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*

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

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.

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.