



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Travelers in Advent

By the Rev. Sharon Gracen

November 27th, 2011

Once upon a time, a traveler from a far and distant town approached a wise man that was just leaving the city into which the traveler was entering. The traveler stopped the wise man and said, "Can you tell me about the city from whence you have just come? What is the quality and character of the citizens here?"

The wise man replied, "First stranger, tell me: What were the people like in the last town you visited?"

The traveler replied, "Oh, they were a cold bunch of people with no kind words for anyone. It was not a happy town. They were very judgmental, and the people were mean-spirited and unwelcoming. I couldn't get out of that town fast enough."

The wise man paused and then replied, "Ah. I believe you will discover that the citizens of this town are exactly the same."

A short distance farther down the road, the wise man encountered another distant traveler entering the city. And likewise, the traveler asked the same question of the wise man, saying, "What is the quality and character of the citizens of this city, sir?"

Again, the wise man replied, "First stranger, tell me: What were the people like in the last town you visited?"

The traveler replied, "Oh, they were an amazing group of people! They were outgoing and friendly and welcomed me with open arms. They were unconditionally loving, and I felt like each one was my brother or sister. Oh, I miss them greatly."

The wise man paused and then replied, "Ah. I believe you will discover that the citizens of this town are exactly the same."

Welcome to Advent, the season of anticipation and expectation. I find the difference between those two words to be helpful in understanding the marvelous complexity of Advent. In the context of this church season, anticipate means to await and to look forward to and to prepare for something, in this case, the coming of the Christ Child. Now, two thousand years after his birth, we experience

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something to akin to memorial anticipation. We know that it has already happened and we celebrate the memory as well as all that it means to us.

One of the great Advent hymns is *Come thou long expected Jesus*. The text takes us back to the era before Jesus birth and expresses the hopes and dreams for the long promised Messiah. Expectation is much more complex than anticipation for it is always colored with meaning, either personal or cultural. When you have an expectation, you have invested something in an outcome. In Jesus' time, the expectations were varied; some awaited the return of a David-like king, someone who would restore Israel to its glory days. Others looked for a Moses figure who would lead them out of their current slavery and to a time of promise. Whichever was expected, it would mean great and mighty things. All of those expectations were built on history and tinged with the misery visited on the Jewish people by the Roman Empire and its hold on their religious, economic and political life. The people of Israel had great expectations of their Messiah as a deliverer. Is it any wonder that Jesus would be misunderstood and denied?

A problem for Christians today is that anticipating the birth of Christ has been corrupted by the anticipation of Christmas. Because it is something that we celebrate every year, it has lost its sense of yearning. There is no urgency around the waiting. In our thoughtful moments, we engage the birth of the Prince of Peace with hope and a seasonally charged compassion. And we always hope that Christmas would affect us enough to carry on into the next year.

When it comes to expectations in Advent, I think that we might be seeing things from the wrong side. Perhaps, expecting that somehow the coming of Christ will make things better is taking the easy way. You see, what really becomes visible and human in the stable in Bethlehem is God's expectation for us. God made us to be loving and compassionate, wonderful and creative. Our failure to live into that expectation is the reason for Christmas. The incarnation is God showing us what is expected of us.

So in this Advent, we are encouraged to take up some self-reflection and ask "what are our expectations?" Do we expect to stay just as we are but have the world reformed to our needs and desires or do we expect to be transformed ourselves and be something new for the world? Can we change our expectations of the world and thus cause it to be better, kinder, and gentler. Which traveler are you as we approach the holy night?

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