

Walking the Long Road

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By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, in order to guide our feet onto the road of peace.

Luke 1: 78-79

A quirk of the calendar this year leaves us with a gift. So often, the Sunday following Thanksgiving is the first Sunday in Advent; and that seems to catapult us out of our chairs, right over the turkey and into the season of holiday preparations.

That's not happening this year. The turkey's gone, the brown sweater's back in the closet, you may or may not have felt the patriotic duty to rush out of the house and contribute to the coffers of Black Friday. And it's still a week before December. It's still a week before Advent.

I know that a lot of Advent-y things are already in the works. The kids have been working hard for weeks on their fabulous pageant. The choir, augmented by some of you who can't resist the delight of singing Christmas music, has started rehearsing. We have wreaths to sell at coffee hour to raise funds for Cuba. Some of you have at least thought about Christmas cards.

But the gift remains. The fact remains. Advent is still a long week off. And December will not arrive until the end of November.

Even the natural world seems aware of the gift. Early this morning I was riding my bike through Riverside Park, down along the river, and I was struck by the awesome array of color still on the trees. Thanksgiving over and done with, and here I was surrounded not only by brown, but by yellow, purple, gold, red, russet, and even green. Talk about a gift.

One thing about gifts: they rarely come without expectations. Some required response.

Here's what I've heard God saying to me in the face of this gift: "You always feel rushed into the holidays, K, rushed into Advent, rushed into the season of

preparation. You say, “Give me a break!” Well, now you’ve got one. Do something with it. Or do nothing with it. But acknowledge it. Name it. Relish it. Revel in it.

And maybe even use it to think about where you are in the great cycle of life. Where you are on the great road of life.”

A lot of time we think about the holidays as a giant to-do list. Here, on top of the usual demands of work or school, family and church, come new demands! New tasks!

Yesterday, faced with a deliciously blank day, we decided to jump-start one holiday tradition, so we spent the day making two large gingerbread houses. Actually, it was one gingerbread house, modeled on Charlene’s sister’s house in Berkeley, CA, complete with blue icing, and one large, built-to-scale model of the Church of St. Paul & St. Andrew. You have to come see it sometime!

At the end of a fun day of gingerbread, skittles, cremesavers and peppermint patties, we decided we’d make a list of what everyone wants to do this holiday season. It quickly grew long. We’d need months to do it all. I found myself a bit overwhelmed, but I brightened at a thought. “Hey, let’s put down ‘Build Gingerbread Houses,’ then we can check it off!”

But the holidays can’t be one more set of things to accomplish; and if they are, we miss the point completely.

The traditions of Advent, whatever they may be, are not about making it to Christmas. The observance of Advent is about creating space for now. Living in the precious now in a way we usually don’t do. And now you have a week to just be, spiritually. To empty yourself for Advent, before Advent. To empty yourself for the coming of the coming.

My friend likes to say, “The past is history. The future is a mystery. The present—is a gift. Why do you think we call it the present?” And after I groan, I think, “He’s right. That’s right. That is absolutely right.”

Take the gift of this coming week for what it is, then; a present. The present of the present.

It's a long road we're on. I know a lot of us have had a tough year. Maybe next year will be easier, maybe it won't. But right now we have right now. And being here in the present with God will help us to face whatever the future chooses to fling across our paths.

In the first scripture reading today, Zechariah is dealing with the fact that his wife Elizabeth has just given birth to the one who will prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. When Zechariah first heard the news, he couldn't believe it. So he didn't believe it. He and his wife are older. Luke puts it diplomatically, "They were both getting on in years." Elizabeth is unable to bear children.

But Zechariah gets used to the idea. He makes peace with the idea. And, sure enough, the child is born, and named John. The one who will earn the nickname, "the Baptist."

All of the friends and relatives of Zechariah and Elizabeth are freaked out by all this. But Zechariah is at peace. Luke tells us that the people are questioning the future, saying, "What will this child become?" But then Luke says, "Indeed, the hand of the Lord is with the baby." "Is with this baby." Not, "will be, when God needs him," But, "the hand of God *is* with him." Is with him right now.

Oh, if we could be more aware of the ways the hand of God is with us. Right now. In our present. Guiding our feet right *now* onto the road of peace.

Sure it's a long road we're walking, and the destination is not something we know. But the way is important. The road is important. Because the road is the road of peace. God's peace. The peace of God's presence. Given in the present.

It does not mean that the road suddenly becomes an easy one. It's so definitely not! The road of peace that Zechariah speaks about is not the road the rest of the world is walking. It's not the road the rest of the world wants you to walk.

Let's look at what scripture says about this little-used road, the road of peace.

1. The road of peace is the road of self-denial.

There is plenty in our lives that has just one point, to satisfy ourselves and boost us up in our little insecurities. The road of peace puts us at peace with ourselves, so we can do what we are created to do, be who we are created to be: people whose whole life is lived for others. People who strive to be a little like Christ.

2. The road of peace is the road through justice.

There is plenty in our lives that encourages us to ignore the road signs of justice along the way. Someone offered me a 30% off card for the Gap last week. I haven't bought clothes in a year, so I was excited. I came home with my precious purchases in hand, and my nine year old daughter takes one look at the bag and says, "My teacher says those clothes were made by children working as slaves." Suddenly my new clothes weren't so exciting to me anymore.

3. The road of peace is the road through salvation.

Isaiah is at his or her most poetic in chapter 12, as we heard in our call to worship, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." What a blessing that is. What a promise that is! What a present reality that can be, but only if we remember to look alongside the road and see those wells, those spaces of spiritual refreshment God hides right in front of us!

4. The road of peace is the road through freedom.

Sister MT Winter has an old song about the road, not so much where it goes, but how we walk it:

*It's a long road to freedom, winding steep and high.
But when you walk in love, with the wind on your wings,
Cover the earth with the songs you sing: the miles fly by.*

The road of peace is a place we can sing, a place we can praise, a place we can testify to the overwhelming compassion of God.

In our second reading we heard about this need to speak the truth of God, and once again, Luke is teaching us about the present:

"You will be brought before kings and governors because of my name, says Jesus. "This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your words in advance." How strange that strikes the modern mind which is taught always to prepare and over-prepare, but the reason soon becomes clear: Jesus says, "For I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

5. The road of peace is God's road.

And finally, the road of peace is the road of God. It's not 86th Street, planned out 200 years ago by people sitting in a room. The road of peace exists from eternity into eternity.

It's not West End Avenue, filled with now-overpriced living places. Along the road of God, everyone is welcome, because it's not our road.

Friends, the holidays will be upon us before we know it. December is coming. Advent is coming. The time of coming is coming. And right now? Right now is a gift. Right now is the present. Right now you're walking the road. And it's a good road. It's God's road. It's the road of peace. Every step is a prayer. And every step is another gift.

*It's a long road to freedom, winding steep and high.
But when you walk in love, with the wind on your wings,
Cover the earth with the songs you sing: the miles fly by.*