

“Silence”
The Rev. Elaine Reichert

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A new poem by Mary Oliver:

There is a place beyond ambition

When the flute players
couldn't think of what to say next

they laid down their pipes,
then they lay down themselves
beside the river

and just listened.
Some of them, after awhile,
jumped up
and disappeared back inside the busy town.
But the rest--
so quiet, not even thoughtful--
are still there,

still listening.

Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. Like all new beginnings, there is an element of hope, a hope that things might play out differently this time around. We all hope that the Annapolis conference might bring some new accord and resolution to the disparate needs of those involved. Will they listen, or will they quarrel? Dare we hope?

How many Advents have you observed? How many have ended in disappointment as the same, grasping, greedy human scenarios have overshadowed, overpowered the simple rebirth of the prince of peace? Brought war and discord instead of peace?

Will this Advent be any different? Do we dare hope that a bunch of grasping politicians will actually come to some workable solution to the problems they've created and profited from? It's hard to imagine the peace conference as anything but a lot of squabbling, finger-pointing, whining and complaining. Yet we do hope it will be different this time.

Imagine if these men had to sit in total silence for one hour, in a circle, making eye contact with one another. Have you ever done that? It's quite amazing, the bond that can form when words are not allowed to get in the way.

To look at someone, just look, without comment, without fear of what they will say in rebuttal is truly amazing. Perhaps we could give a new meaning to the phrase *an eye for an eye*. Because when we look into the eyes of another human being we can neither lie nor hide. The eyes truly are the window into the soul through which we experience our shared humanity, our commonality. His eyes look out upon the same world as mine. I see myself mirrored on the iris of my companion even as she is mirrored upon mine.

Take a moment. Close your eyes and imagine the peace conference as a circle of people sitting in silent wonder at the miracle of common, human life. Now bring that same level of wonder and amazement into your body. Can you feel something happen in your body as you sink into silence? A softening, an opening? Perhaps a bit of discomfort or curiosity as you allow your thoughts and concerns to cease? Let it become the place where you search for compassion, where your prayer arises from deep in your heart.

Allow yourself to become comfortable with this simple, quiet inner sanctum. It is a storehouse of treasure, waiting for you to enter and receive it. Advent is a time of immense opportunity, a time to touch this deeper, more insightful level of consciousness. But it's an opportunity which must be consciously chosen, guarded, protected.

Our culture has turned Advent into a whirlwind chaos of shopping, parties, and seasonal decorating. To do lists, Christmas card lists, gift lists add further tension to busy lives. Like a thief breaking into your concentration, banal, Christmas themed muzak assaults you no matter where you go. How then can we keep watch for the unexpected hour?

Or can we create the unexpected hour by tuning out some of these external demands. Silence, the universal language. The language of peace. Inner peace. I challenge you to carve out an hour a week for the next four weeks to sit in complete silence.

What thoughts will arise as you strive to tune out the muzak of the world? Let them drift by like clouds on a summer day. When you find yourself distracted by busy concerns, take a deep breath and come back to awareness of your body, your surroundings. Reaffirm your desire for tranquility.

Many early followers of Jesus believed that they would come to know God in this inner realm of stillness. That idea was too threatening for the later political church who labeled it heresy. Yet gnosis, knowledge that we are kin with God, is our birthright. St. Paul hints at this in his more mystical passages which suggest that we are meant to grow into the full stature of Christ.

Each week in Advent has a unique theme that is meant to open and prepare you to receive the enlightenment of Christ's indwelling Spirit that is renewed at Christmas. The baby that's awaited isn't some historical event, but your soul waiting to begin or deepen its journey to spiritual maturity. Like a human infant, your soul will encounter

challenging trials and tribulations as it grows into the full stature of Christ. Some souls don't make it. But the miracle of Advent and Christmas is that the journey can begin again. There is always another chance to get it right.

This week's gospel speaks to that. Awakening will come suddenly, unpredictably. Some will get it and some won't. People will be going about their ordinary lives, doing ordinary things and suddenly everything will change. Nothing bad will happen to those who aren't taken, they're just left to wait.

Have you ever experienced a sudden life-changing event? One moment you were just doing some ordinary task and suddenly something clicked that set you on a completely different path? Something shifted and there was no going back. Perhaps when you met the person you married, there came a moment when you suddenly knew your life would be inextricably bound up with theirs. Maybe you reached a turning point in a healing crisis and knew you needed to survive in order to complete some task. Perhaps a friend invited you to travel somewhere and it became a life changing awakening that led you in new directions. Perhaps you had a near death experience that sent you careening back into your body with a renewed sense of purpose for living.

None of these events could be planned or anticipated in the way they played out. Yet there was no going back to the way things were before. That's the quality of sudden, radical, life-transforming awakening we're looking for during Advent. These events can't be forced, but they can be prepared for so that when they come, you are awake enough to seize and respond to the invitation.

Does this mean you should go for days on end without sleep? No. That's a prescription for insanity. Awake in this context is a state of vigilant attentiveness; receptivity to subtle nuances. For this you must be well rested so that your mind is clear. Go about your daily tasks but regard them as the vehicle through which God will speak to you. Clear away unnecessary, extraneous distractions. Simplify your living or working space to eliminate clutter. Slow down and do less. Be more.

As we go through the four weeks of Advent, you might find it helpful to ponder the journey of Mary as she awaits the birth of the mysterious child she carries. Her body is heavy, her belly distended. Her back probably hurts. Yet beyond this discomfort she is filled with joyful trepidation. She doesn't know the hour when her labor will begin, nor whether the birth will be easy or difficult. She doesn't even know where her child will enter the world. Yet she is vigilant, watchful, aware of the changes in her body that signal her impending delivery.

Meanwhile she goes about her daily tasks: Grinding meal, making bread, milking her goats, washing dishes, sewing a few more little clothes for her child. Perhaps she experiences a few pangs of false labor that have her hoping her time has come. She feels disappointment as they subside again. Her poignant waiting has a heavy quality, a slowness of movement that can be a creative counterpoint to the madness of getting

through a holiday to do list.

Let this Advent be a time to simplify and prepare for the real gift that is Christ.

Here are some thoughts on grace that can guide your meditations:

Grace is an act that appears out of stillness.

Grace is a kindness provided, but not expected.

Grace happens when the heart asks, rather than the mind

Grace is more gentle than a feather, more potent than the most powerful elixir, and simpler than a child's coloring book.

Grace is our ability to bless each other.

Our hearts are the doorway.

Silence of mind, the means to open the door.

Stillness in time, our ability to know Grace.

Peace, as we are embraced into God's arms.