

Advent as an Invitation to Spaciousness

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

December 1, 2024

When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord; he brought me into a spacious place. He brought me forth also into a large place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me. (Psalms 118:5 1044 and 18:19 1019)

These words of despair and promise, written by King David in the 11th century BC, heralded the need for space in difficult times and were also precursors to what the role of ritual would be in Christian worship. King David, son of Jesse and second King of Israel, who beat Goliath and ultimately united the twelve tribes of Israel, also lived for a time like Robin Hood and brought other outlaws and refugees together. "David was not the first King of Israel; that was Saul. He was not the most renowned; that was David's son, Solomon. David himself was known to later ages as a precocious warrior, a chivalrous opponent, and a singer of Psalms."¹ Not only did David exalt, but he also felt defeated and called to his God, who delivered him to a large place, a place of spaciousness.

One thousand years later, Jesus was born, next to the spaciousness of the Judean desert, at a time, like ours, of political unrest. In his early years, Rabbi Jesus studied the laws of his religion and of the times. Later, he would rebel against all violence, segregation and oppression. He would eat with the lepers, the women and the outcasts. He would heal the sick and make friends with the tax collectors. He would be pursued by enemies and sought after by followers. And he would show up time and again, even when he was weary. Yet there were times that Jesus also needed space. At such times, he would go to the mountains to be with his God and pray.

As Sarina Khan Reddy reminded us in her reflection about Ghandi a few weeks ago, we all need space—sanctuary in our hearts and minds—a place where we can rest for just a minute, especially in disorientating or worrying times.

¹ <https://www.umass.edu/wsp/publications/books/early/jesus/ja-01-david.pdf>

Thankfully, advent is all about a time of rest and of waiting for the hope and clarity we need.

This is the time of year when the rest of nature slows and becomes quiet as if in a long pause, reflecting upon and releasing the past year. The earth holds dormant seeds until their time rises in the spring or summer. December is the start of hibernation, interiority, and reflection.

Yet unlike the rest of nature, this time of year is one of the busiest times of the year for many of us. With capitalism in full throttle, the stores and sales speed up, the pressure to give the perfect gift mounts, and comparisons to other people increase, bringing the epidemic of loneliness along with it.

We can choose another way, friends. Rather than reach for more and fill our days, we can turn to each other, to the rest of nature, and to our deeper selves. We can let go of the gadgets and commands, be less consuming and more giving—of ourselves, our attention, and our care. We can turn this into a season of spaciousness, where quiet is our song and the nighttime sky and candlelit windows are our companions.

Let us take a moment of stillness to connect within to the quiet pause of nature within ourselves, that space in between all of our busyness.

MEDITATIVE PAUSE FOR BREATH

Advent is traditionally associated with Christianity and waiting for the birth of Jesus. It is a time of great meaning for many people, me included. I invite us this morning, however, to be expansive in our thinking and to go beyond the traditional religious view of Advent.

Advent, which happens during the darkest time of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, is the time that we are called to walk across a threshold of certainty and what is known and familiar, and move into a place of curiosity, open to possibility and what may come to pass. This is an opportunity for us to experience the spirituality and mystery of waiting, which by its nature

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requires spaciousness.

We cannot always rush to answers and solutions; we need spaciousness and a willingness to be present, to see and listen, so that we may receive clarity. The flame of our creativity is sure to dim without a consistent practice of creating space.

Advent is the time in which we practice the sacred act of learning to see in the darkness until the light of the stars becomes clear. It is in the light so beautifully beheld in the light of the moon that we will experience things anew. It is this nighttime light that illuminates parts of ourselves that we feared we had lost in our weariness, including our joy, our creativity, our love. The starlight will rekindle our creative impulses and clarity will come.

Christianity and Judaism are not the only religions that speak of the need for spaciousness. The Tao-te Ching references the power of spaciousness so beautifully.

*Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.²*

Why is it so hard to allow for space when we know it is good for us?

We must discipline ourselves to stop grabbing for more of everything and instead to start observing and to allow insight to emerge. With all the troubling things that are happening in the world around us we need to remain connected to the still point within us, the *axis mundi*, that connects us with our inner compass.

2 Tao-te Ching Chapter 11, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00006490#:~:text=It%20is%20the%20centre%20hole,that%20they%20simply%20follow%20Nature.>

And there is nothing we *have* to do to get ready for spaciousness. Spaciousness is not for sale at the local spa, or even at Jabberwocky Bookshop. Space is here waiting for you, amidst your concerns, your wishes, and bottomless to-do list. Space is waiting for you to say, "Come in." There is nothing we need to prepare.

Let us make way for spaciousness now, as we wrap up our time together, by listening to Mary Oliver and opening our hearts to what is waiting for us.

I invite each of you to take a moment to connect with the quiet space in your heart right now. Listen to what it is saying and what it asks from you during this time. How will you create spaciousness in the days and weeks ahead?

VISUALIZATION

If you will, just close your eyes.

Breathe deep and feel your feet upon the floor.

Feel the cushion that you sit upon, and the wood of the pew behind your back.

Know that you are safe. You are in a place of love.

Here where you are held in the loving embrace of this community.

Breathing in, relax your body. Squeeze your feet, relax...squeeze your legs, relax...squeeze your stomach, your hands, your arms, your face and your eyes, and relax.

Now in this state of relaxation, ask yourself what it is that you most need for this holiday season.

What does your heart or mind or soul hunger for? How can you be your own best friend? What is it that is the most loving thing that you can do for yourself?

See whatever comes to you and accept that. If nothing comes, do not be concerned but know that something will come later when the time is right.

Now, imagine someone that you love. Someone very close to you. A family member, friend, coworker, neighbor. Maybe someone in this church family. Ask yourself what this person needs from you. What is it that you can do for

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them this holiday season? Is it to listen? To be more present, to laugh more, to offer a helping hand. To be less judgmental?

Allow yourself to take a moment and connect to what this person needs most from you. Again, do not be concerned if nothing specifically comes to you. Trust that it will.

And last, consider now the world around you. The town you live in, the earth, the people you work with, the world at large. How are you being called to help this world? How can you live in a gentler, braver, or more caring way? What practice can you do to be a person who helps to make the world—be that your family or neighborhood—a better place for all?

Now breathing in this peaceful place, know that you take this peace with you. And that you can return here anytime that you wish.

Breathing in, feel your feet on the floor. Wiggle your finger, move your hands, and when you are ready gently open your eyes and return to this place.

May you invite spaciousness into your days, may you welcome its companionship and learn the gifts of its ways, until we meet again.

Amen.