

Advent 4, 2015

The advent wreath, (ours is boxwood and cedar, with fragrance), carefully tended and freshened by Br Isaiah, is not simply a decoration whose function will be finished this week. The advent wreath is a symbol for the season. But what exactly does it symbolize? That is hard to say. The best symbols, a cross or butterfly or crown of thorns, are symbols instead of concepts, because they can't be nailed down in words. There is a glorious ambiguity to them. Symbols allow us to meditate from a variety of angles, and see something new each time we revisit them. A symbol allows us to deepen our insight if we let it.

So let's explore. At bottom we might say the advent wreath is simply a way of marking the time. Candles burn down as days pass. X-ing off the days of the calendar in anticipation of a special event. But maybe the advent wreath is more like candles on a birthday cake. We add one for each year in recognition that the more we live the bigger and brighter our experience becomes. Until at last we are ready to be born into a bigger world, the world of eternity.

Advent and Christmas should remind us that life is meant for more than just marking off time. We are created for eternity. We are given earthly life to get ready for and appreciate eternity. In little doses we get to know the God we are meant to spend eternity with. So we are getting ready for more than Christmas. We are getting ready to meet God in a way that will excite us. Jesus comes down to live with us, so that we might learn how to enter heaven and live with him. The advent wreath reminds us of time, the preciousness of it, and encourages us to use it well. For our lives, like the season of Advent, are beautiful, filled with precious things, and so short. The gradually increasing light of the advent wreath reminds us of time.

It is obvious to say that the circular wreath at the bottom has no beginning and no end. That is like God, like eternity, like the world beyond time where God is. But circularity also hints at unity or wholeness. A circle is perfect and unbroken. We know this is not the way the world or our lives are. There are jagged edges, pieces missing, and deep crevices which seem impossible to jump over. One task in life is to come to terms with these flaws, injuries, ugly imperfections. This involves both acceptance and willingness to work towards healing. The serenity prayer expresses the challenge beautifully. Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. If we allow ourselves to be changed by that prayer, we will gradually find the right balance

between action and acceptance. We will know when to do God's work for him; we will know when to let go and let God. The circle is about eternity and wholeness.

Some churches give a theme to each candle: the prophecy candle, the baptist's candle, the shepherd's candle, and one for the angels. There are variations on the scheme. But such precise explanations are artificial and limiting. It's not like you can leave prophecy behind after week one, and become an angel in week four. So I like to think of the four candles as pillars for a house. In the house of my soul, I think of the people who as pillars raised up my house so that I could live in it. I think of my family, my teachers, my friends. If I'm really pushed to admit it, I also think of neighbors, co-workers, religious community, and not-so-friendly friends who make me what I am today. What I'm trying to say is that the people who inspire and co-create me are not all easy to get along with. Some of them really try my patience. But each of them has something important to teach me. Often the most valuable lesson comes from someone I find difficult. But if I put up with that person long enough, if I learn to make peace with my antagonist, I learn that they came into my life for a reason. They make my house strong.

Thus, for Jesus the pillars were the happy memory of his parents Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. They were the challenging message of his mentor John the Baptist, who met death rather than submit to false compromise. They were the friendships he formed with his twelve disciples and the women providing financial support and companionship on his journey to Jerusalem. Lastly, they included his antagonists and betrayer, who enabled him to accomplish his life's work at Calvary. This idea makes us squirm. How can *enemies* help us do what we are meant to do; why do they have a contributing role in our mission? If we look hard enough, we see that learning to forgive them is the most powerful tool we will ever formulate, one that holds the roof up. The candles represent the pillars of our house.

Finally, the flickering flame on the wick atop the candles. Those who are good at making connections will think backwards from Christ's birth to the burning bush. There Moses heard the voice of God and knelt down on holy ground. This reminds us of our faith heritage. But you can also fast-forward from Christmas to Pentecost. Enter the first experience of the Holy Spirit, when the word of God came out of the apostles' mouths in many languages, and they felt the heat of the Spirit in little flames upon their heads. The flames could represent the hearth which draws the family together, and where the meals are cooked for both body and soul.

There is an exquisitely moving prophecy in Isaiah 42 describing qualities of the messiah. “I have put my spirit upon him so that the bruised reed he will not break and the dimly burning wick he will not quench. He will not stop until justice is established on earth and distant coasts accept his law.” This takes our breath away. The messiah is powerful, able to transform world history, in the words of Dr King making its arc bend towards justice. But *simultaneously* messiah is gentle—he will not crush us who are bruised, bent, and dim.

The flames flicker because they are alive. They burn only for a time. They represent us, alive now, but only for a time. So when you look at an advent wreath, don’t see the birth of Christ just as a past historical event. Look at the flame and see your own life there as part of the nativity scene: your life being warmed, illumined, made to glow, being simmered into a complex, delicious stew. All are effects of welcoming the Christ child. The child was given not only long ago to Mary and Joseph. Jesus is being born now, right in this minute, to you.

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