

Pregnant pause

Isaiah 61:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28

Rev Jean Shannon

Christmas is coming! Expectations are rising. The very idea that the Lord is coming has led to increased joy and excitement in the community. Is it you? Is it you? When will it happen? How will I know? The rumblings of celebration are all around us. Not so distant now. Next week there's at least 4 carolling opportunities. The Christmas trees are up. When will the lights happen? What will they look like?

We have the luxury of naming the day as if it was a caesarean birth. We've booked the delivery for the 25th. But not then... and not normally. We wait anxiously and listen tolerantly to a lot of people with opinions about when, how it's going to happen and whether it's a boy or a girl. There is no suppressing the hopeful mood of ecstasy – even if we don't feel it. Even if deep down, we are worried about 1000 things.

The anointed one is coming. Isaiah tells us the oppressed will be freed and the broken-hearted will be restored to wholeness. Just like that! Over night.

Those who have known pregnancy know that it can be filled with frustration at what your body can and can't do. Simple tasks like putting on your shoes become impossible and the mind wonders, if I can't do that, how can I produce a human? While all around you people are enthusiastic. 'Oh, they say, your life will never be the same again!'. And when you let your frustration show, some well-meaning friend might say, "Well, God's time is not our time." Or "Women have been doing this for centuries".

The pregnant pause is a very good metaphor for Advent. "Advent comes, not in spite of this moment in time but precisely because of it."¹

"Over the years, I've heard many sermons address *when* and *where* introducing the idea of the Two Comings of Advent. The First Coming was long ago — when Jesus came into the world, taught love of God and neighbour, was killed, and then, most surprisingly, was raised from the dead. The Second Coming is in the future — when Jesus will come again and establish God's reign of love and justice.

¹ Sarah Bessey *Field Notes*, 8 Dec 23

But that's still problematic. We don't live back then and there — when Jesus was born. And we don't live in the upcoming when and where — at the time of Jesus' return. Advent can be a doubly frustrating exercise of celebrating two times and places we can't ever know or experience.

We need an Advent of now and here, an Advent of Near.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the great medieval theologian of love, once insisted that there were *three* Advents. "We know that the coming of the Lord is threefold," he preached. "***The first coming was in flesh and weakness, the middle coming is in spirit and power, and the final coming will be in glory and majesty.***"

Thomas Merton, who was profoundly influenced by St. Bernard, wrote about the Second Advent, saying, "The second is in a certain sense the most important for us..."

The "Second Advent" by which Christ is present in our souls now, depends on our present recognition of...the passage of Christ through our world, through *our own lives*.

Meditating on the past and future Advents, we learn to recognize the present Advent that is taking place at every moment of our own earthly life as wayfarers...

Meditation on the first Advent gives us hope of the promise offered us. The remembrance of the third reminds us to fear lest by our fault we fail to receive the fulfillment of that promise. The second Advent, the present, set in between these two terms, is therefore necessarily a time of anguish, a time of conflict between fear and joy.

God is Near. Maybe near is enough. Not just imminent, but immanent. We aren't just waiting. But God already dwells with us. Advent is the season of now and here.

Keep awake to that.²"

And awake is almost all you do in the last month of pregnancy. The baby indwells – it is both now and here. When the time comes, it is never convenient. To some, the first pain is in the grocery store, to others while putting Christmas dinner on the

² DIANA BUTLER BASS, The Cottage, 4 December 2023, "Images for a Beautiful Advent"

table. On a good day, 4am is never a good time but like all pregnant pauses, they come to an end.

Not an end but a beginning ...a terrible beginning of hours and hours of something else entirely. Eventually, exasperated, exhausted, a birthing mother just wants it over...perhaps another metaphor for the holiday season...or for some, their finite faith and patience.

But in our Advent and in our birthing chambers, a miracle takes place. Perhaps it is for a second, or for a lifetime. That is when you see perfection embodied. It's like a snapshot. The world stops as you examine the perfect fingers of a newborn; or you look into the eyes of your new bride or husband; or you look around the room and see your grown children bustling around you; or you are standing in church singing loudly and beautifully with your community. It is amazing and it is perfect even just for that second.

It is as simple as awe. How could such a creature or a moment be? And then, from deep within that infinitely tiny time of awe, joy springs.

Amen