

“Let the Stillness”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation.

There’s really nothing still about it.

The holiday hope of a night, both calm and bright, is completely missing.
from Robert Fanning’s poem, “A Deer in the Target.”

The poem does, however, address so much of our society’s experience in this season.

The Target, of which he speaks, at least initially, is one and the same,
as the ill-fated retailer that moved to Canada a few years ago
attempting to compete with Canadian Tire.

You may recall that the store’s logo
is a giant red and white bull’s-eye.

I only got a ten-second shot,
grainy footage of the huge deer
caught in the crosshairs
of a ceiling security camera, a scene
of utter chaos in a strip mall store,
shown on the late local news.

The beautiful beast clearly scared
to death in this fluorescent forest,
its once graceful legs giving out
on mopped floors, think Bambi
as a fawn its first time standing.

Seeing the scattering shoppers,
you’d think a demon had barged
into this temple of commerce,

as they sacrificed their merchandise,
stranded full carts and dove for cover.

And when the aisles were emptied
of these bargain hunters, who was left
but an army of brave red-shirted
[sales] team members, mobilized by
the store manager over the intercom
to drive this wild animal out.

I wager there's nothing on this
in the How to Approach
an Unsatisfied Shopper
section in the Target employee handbook,
but there they were: the cashiers
and stockers, the Floor Supervisor,
the Assistant Floor Supervisor,
the Store Manager,
the Assistant Store Manager,
the District Associate Manager,
the District Supervisor,
the District Assistant Supervisor
and visiting members from
the Regional Corporate Office,
running after it, it running after
them, bull's eye logos on their red golf shirts,
everyone frenzied and panting: razor hooves
clattering on the mirror-white floor tiles,
nostrils heaving, its rack[of antlers] clearing
off-season clothes from [the] clearance racks.

All of them, in Target,
chasing the almighty buck.

I suspect this holiday season,
retailers could only hope for that much excitement in their stores!

Already, this year, of course, the countdown is well underway.
The calendar tells us that only nine shopping days remain.
Somehow, when I wasn't watching,
the Santa Claus Parade came and went.

Whether Christmas is our thing or not,
whether we celebrate it with gusto or celebrate it not at all,
even those who merely tolerate its exuberant return each year,
cannot easily escape the hubbub of this particular holiday.

A season of excessive expectation is descending now upon us,
a season that can leave even the cheeriest among us
feeling like that poor, panicked deer
darting to and fro through some surreal shopping escapade.

Now, sometimes it's our family traditions—
or our family, itself—
that drives us to such distraction.

Sometimes, it's just the pressure of the culture all about us.
The feeling that we have to do and give and be more,
in order to be enough, at this time of year.

It doesn't help if celebrity chefs and TV icons loom large in our imagination,
spreading holiday cheer,
as well as widespread feelings of inadequacy
among those of us who can't quite keep up.

For instance, Martha Stewart's tongue-in-cheek holiday to-do list includes:

- + draining the city reservoir and refilling it with mulled cider,
orange slices and cinnamon sticks;
- + installing plumbing in the gingerbread house;
- + seeding the clouds for a white Christmas;
- + and, building a snow person in the exact likeness of God.

It's all over the top, and, of course, all in good fun,
but sometimes, some of us seem
to hold ourselves to an even higher standard.

Each year, in the pursuit of an elusive, "perfect" Christmas,
we are encouraged to spend more money and do damage to the environment,

trying to conform to expectations or fulfill unspoken desires,
even while we report to pollsters
that our actual experience of the holidays
often leaves us wanting, and feeling unfulfilled.

The book *Unplug the Christmas Machine* explains that:

The Christmas Machine has this power over us
because it knows how to woo us;
[because] it speaks to the deepest, [most] profound,
and most sacred desires of the human heart.

If it appeared as a monster, we would rise up and stop it.
But the commercial messages of [the holidays] appear
as promises that bring tears to our eyes.

Look at the bounty we are promised by the December magazines
and the glowing [holiday] commercials:

Our families will be together and happy...
Our children will be well-behaved and grateful...
Our [spouses] will be generous, nurturing...and appreciative...
We will have enough money...
We will have enough time...
We will have fun...
We will be warm...
We will be safe...
We will be *truly* loved.

No wonder we stop, we listen, and we want to believe.¹

And, who among us doesn't want each and every one of these things?

Indeed, these things speak
to some of the deepest longings of our souls.

But what strikes me about this list of "things"
is that most of them, of course, aren't actually *things* at all—
at least not things for sale at the Bay or Canadian Tire.

¹ *Unplug the Christmas Machine*, Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli.

Instead, they are deep expressions of hope—
a hope that we might find some true measure
of “comfort and joy” in this season.

Yet, all too often, these aren’t the items that actually end up
on our heart’s holiday wish list—or, for that matter, under the tree, or in our stocking.

Instead of knowing—and sharing—
what we truly want for Christmas,
all too often we just get sucked into the holiday vortex,
never really telling anyone the deepest longing of our hearts.

At times, I think people do it on purpose—
throwing themselves into the holidays,
buying up false promises—
all to avoid looking into the depths
of their deepest wants and needs.

For many years, I’ve been a big advocate for simplifying Christmas,
for celebrating the holidays on our own terms,
for stripping away the excesses and extravagance
that too often get in the way of the season’s greatest gifts.

It’s not that I’m a Scrooge;
I love Christmas and always have.

It’s just that, for me, it’s not always so easy
for Christmas to come,
if the trappings of the holiday have taken over.

In the frenetic race toward December 25th,
if we let it, there is more than plenty
to distract us from the real promise that this season offers.

The promise we can so easily miss
by sprinting right through the holidays on the way to the finish line.

When we get so swept up in the tide of holiday *expectations*
and miss the opportunity to simply live in quiet *expectation*.

That is what this season of Advent is

to our Christian friends and neighbours:
a time for introspection,
a time for preparation in the heart,
a time for waiting and discernment.

As an Anglican friend of mine put it:
Advent is the time when Christians contemplate
why someone like Jesus was needed in the first place.

So, it's a time, not of Christmas carols and decked-out churches,
but a period of gestation for what we long to be born within us,
a period of intentional, spiritual self-examination.

And, that, more than anything,
is what I want for us all in this season.

That we might embrace stillness whenever and wherever we can.

That we might work to create peace within,
and then let it radiate out from us.

That we just might engage in a regular practice of mindfulness,
to create that "Silent Night" within,
so that we don't just careen right into it,
frazzled and unprepared, a couple of weeks from now.

For what I most treasure about this season
is its quiet, grace-filled moments—
and what I have found out the hard way
is that such moments are few and far between,
without my regular willingness to wait for them.

Even worse, I've learned that I miss them altogether
when I scatter my attention in every direction, but inward.

The good news is that we are not without patient teachers, in this.

At this time of year, in this part of the world,
we need only follow nature's quiet example,
beholding what Macrina Wiederkehr describes
as the "vigil of trust" kept by a great tree:

Slowly
she celebrated the sacrament of *letting go*
first she surrendered her *green*,
then the *orange, yellow, and red*
finally she let go of her *brown*.
shedding her last leaf
she stood empty and silent, stripped bare.

Leaning against the winter sky
she began her vigil of trust.

Shedding her last leaf
she watched it journey to the ground.
She stood in silence
wearing the color of emptiness
her branches wondering:
How do you give shade with so much gone?

And then, the sacrament of waiting began,
the sunrise and sunset watched with tenderness.
Clothing her with silhouettes
they kept her hope alive.
They helped her understand that
her vulnerability
her dependence and need
her emptiness
her readiness to receive
were [all] giving her a new kind of beauty.
[And,] every morning and every evening
they stood in silence
and celebrated together
the sacrament of waiting!²

At this harried season, what if we were all
to practise such a sacrament?

Not mindlessly fulfilling expectations,
but letting go and simply standing still,

² “The Sacrament of Letting-go” by Macrina Wiederkehr.

waiting in quiet expectation,
and pondering what, in the fullness of time,
might come to life through us?

I wonder what it would mean for us, if we,
as a spiritual community, gave ourselves over
to practicing this Sacrament of Waiting—
if we could embrace the stillness of this season,
and accept the invitation to stop running,
to stop running through our lives,
and to stop running from our lives,
that we might stand still,
with arms outstretched, standing open
to the truth of our lives and the deepest calling of our dreams?

I love that image—of a great tree engaged in a “vigil of trust,”
and I love even more the vision of a forest of such trees
arrayed on the side of hope, together,
even when all might seem hopeless.

It is to me, an image of deep, abiding faith,
the kind of which Albert Camus spoke when he said that:
“In the depth of winter I finally learned
that there was within me an invincible summer.”

Friends, let us not allow this season to pass
without first finding within ourselves
something of that invincible summer.

Let us give ourselves over to this sacred season of waiting,
standing together in a vigil of silent trust,
searching our hearts
for the first signs of something precious
waiting to be born.

So may it be.

Amen.