

## HOW TO PACE OURSELVES

Isaiah 2:1-5

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There was a time when it was easier for human beings to live according to the rhythms of nature - in fact, it was impossible not to. Before the industrial revolution, before electricity, people were awake when the sun was up and asleep when the sun went down. In an agricultural society, people worked very hard from mid-spring through late autumn, putting in crops, taking care of crops, and then harvesting crops and ensuring food for the winter. Then, in the short cold days of winter, people rested more.

Even fifty years ago, the pace of life was different. Think of all that has changed in that time. 50 years ago, no one was on the phone while driving nor watching TV in the middle of the night. Few people worked on Sundays; certainly no children played sports on Sundays. It wasn't hard to slow down on the weekends, because everyone else did.

We designated 2019 the Year of Sabbath here at the church, and I will tell you that many jokes have been made at staff meetings and Church Council meetings, comments like, "How's that focus on sabbath working for you?" For it has not been a slow year around here.

But I will argue that this is exactly the point. We live in a 24/7 world. We're not going to change it, so there is absolutely no point in complaining about it. The point is

we have to be intentional. If we are going to find a spiritually healthy way to live, it will be because we make the decision to be deliberately countercultural.

Advent is a perfect time to practice a new way of being. Not because it's not busy - precisely because it's super busy.

Advent isn't a word you'll hear much outside the church. It is a word peculiar to the church, and a season kept by the church. Practicing Advent forces us to slow down and not rush through this month. Christmas music has been playing in stores for weeks now, but here in the church we don't even have our tree up yet. Here we light one candle at a time, each week an opportunity to pause and reflect on what it might mean for God to be reborn into our lives and into our world.

Advent is an invitation for us to slow down and to say yes only to the things that will help you prepare your heart for Christmas. It's NOT a pre-Christmas countdown. Advent welcomes us into a different worldview, a different culture.

The world out there gives us nonstop Christmas music and advertisements for a life of MORE. More shopping, more buying, more events, more activities, more baking and on and on. Look at everyone else's life on social media and see how yours compares. Do they have a more beautifully decorated home? Are their children more adorned in cute holiday clothing than yours are? Is someone's else's family photo more creative?

When you feel drawn into the competitive culture of more, leave that world behind and come in here where it's Advent. Where we remember that what we are celebrating is the life of a poor child born to a humble family. A child who grew up to shun everything material and commercial, a child who grew up suspicious of wealth and power. If

you want your Christmas to be at all Christ-like, your Christmas will be slower and more simple, your Christmas will be about generosity to those who need the most.

But I don't mean to be a bah humbug about Christmas. I don't mean to say that everything about our Christmas traditions is bad and that only what we do inside the church is good. The problem is that our culture doesn't know how to truly celebrate. Overconsumption and overstimulation have become the only ways we know how to mark a special occasion. Every year it has to be bigger and better. One writer says this, only somewhat cynically: "If we're not weighed down by anxiety and insomnia, then it must not be a very important occasion."

We in the church try to do it all - to have the perfect holiday by the world's standards, instagram-worthy tables and cookies and outfits, yet also experience something spiritually meaningful. It can be exhausting and overwhelming. I heard one of our young parents say recently, "I just hate the holidays. I'm always glad when they're over." That statement just breaks my heart, for there are so many gifts in this season. Yes there is stress and pressure, but there is also the quiet beauty of twinkling lights and candlelight, there is music that touches us deeply, there is the joy of hearing from old friends and reuniting with relatives, there are tastes and smells that remind us of loved ones no longer with us.

And then there is the child, whose birth we await.

\*The birth of a child is both a time of poignant gratitude and a time of quiet anticipation. I remember how friends of mine described the day they brought their first child home from the hospital. They placed him in his crib, in the room they had been preparing for months, and watched him sleep. For hours they sat in contented silence. My

friend said, “It was unlike any other moment in my life. It was the greatest moment of love we’d ever experienced. There was nothing else in the world we needed that day - we had everything. My friend looked into his son’s eyes and was full of anticipation. “Who will my son be? What will he do in his life?”

What does it mean that God wants to be reborn into our lives and into our world? During Advent we read from the prophet Isaiah, from a time when the people of Israel were waiting for a Messiah, someone who will teach them God’s ways, someone who will show them how to live. This Messiah will not be a military or political ruler — no, Israel had had plenty of those. What they longed for was someone who would fully embody the values of their God who had taught them to care for widows and orphans and strangers, the God who had given them the ten commandments, rules for living in peace with one another. Who will this Messiah be? Isaiah says, “Someone who will judge between the nations and arbitrate for many people, so that we will learn how to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks...so that instead of killing one another, we will grow food together and feed one another. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, neither we will learn war any more.” This is the Messiah they were waiting for, and this is the Messiah we still need, someone to remind us that our highest calling is the work of peace and justice.

We prepare ourselves for God to be reborn in us and in our world during this time of Advent. Advent is a season of anticipation, yearning and longing for a different kind of life and a different kind of world.

The Advent and Christmas season are full of meaning and promise; they can awaken our longings for that better world for which we hope, but only if we make time

and room for it to happen. If we rush from one event to another, if we worry allow words like “more” and “perfect” into our vocabularies, if we even think of how what we know of our lives compares to the way other people are displaying theirs, this season will be just one more experience of busy-ness.

The spiritual meaning of the season is this - God wants to be born into our lives and into our world. God isn't going to scream at us; that's not how God communicates. If we want to notice God's messages, we'll have to create open spaces for hope and attentiveness in our hearts. We can clear away what distracts us. We can reduce the external clutter of the season by simplifying our celebration. We can balance our times of music and noise with times of silence and solitude. We can learn to say “no” when we find ourselves spinning from invitations and crowds. We can listen to the voices of people who are not often heard over the cultural shouting - the poor, the hungry, the suffering around the world. We can prepare a quiet place for God to be born among us.

At its best, Advent can serve as a reset button, a pause to remember what matters the most to us.

\*This story from: “A Counter-Cultural Quiet in Advent,” by Adam S. McHugh on Pa-theos.