



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

The 2nd SUNDAY of ADVENT
DECEMBER 4, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. Jo P. Popham

“An Advent Moment” Matthew 3:1-12

The stage was dark. The crowd of more than 1100 people had checked their coats and made their way to their seats at the Eisenhower Theatre at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts Center in Washington, D.C. As it came time for the curtain to go up they pondered why the stage was exposed and appeared to be completely empty. People started shuffling through paper in their playbills to try to figure “what was next” at Mandy Patinkin’s show “Dress Casual.” Then one light appeared on the stage. People caught their breath. The “ghost light” was in the center of the stage. That single light burned for a few long minutes. An upright piano was rolled out down left on the empty stage. Again there was extraordinary silence. Then the pianist came out alone and took his seat on the piano bench, and the air was pregnant with silence. Then, finally, the piano tinkled to life with a slow simple version of “When the red, red robin comes bob-bob-bobbin’ along.” And then he stopped. And there was this long silence before he began to play again. That was an Advent Moment. The anticipation was intentional. We waited for what was next. The piano did start up again. Part the way through the first line, Mandy Patinkin came out bob-bob-bobbin’ and singing his version of a “Doodle-doo-doo Medley” of the “Red Red Robin.” It was worth the wait.

Our son Phil plays the oboe professionally. It was our great pleasure to be able to see him perform many times when he was at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. All orchestras tune their instruments to the single note played by the oboe. Give me an “A” please, Don. After everyone adjusted their scores on their music stands. Their very focused lamps were moved for optimum sight lines. When paper stopped being shuffled, the concert master – the 1st violin – nodded to Phil who played his “A.” The horns, the strings, every instrument in the orchestra tuned to Phil’s “A.” There was then chaos of tuning of every instrument. Then there was more silence, and Phil played his “A” again.

And the tuning progressed again. This was repeated until the concert master was satisfied. The Miriam A. Friedberg Concert Hall of the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University is a beautiful and historic performance space that seats 625 people. Most of the patrons were so respectful of the tuning process. A few late-comers did burst into the concert hall, shaking snow off their hats and coats with their galoshes sloshing as they climbed over those already settled in their seats. Clearly, they were not parents of those in the orchestra. Sometimes those folks were greeted with soft hisses. Count on it, they never came late again thinking that the show began when the music actually started. Then there was deafening silence, more deep than all the preceding quietness. The conductor came out from stage left, looking at the concert master who gave the signal that the orchestra was prepared and ready. Sometimes the people in the house would applaud the arrival of the conductor. More often than not we waited quietly. The conductor took to the podium, adjusted his music score then raised the baton. It hovered in the air. All eyes were on that baton, those in the house and more importantly all those in the orchestra. And then there was a long long silence as everyone waited for the first down stroke of that baton, as we all waited. That was an Advent moment.

The people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to John. Even the oh-so-pious Pharisees and the Sadducees were coming to him for baptism. His words were not easy for any of them to hear. John did not mince words. But they all stayed, wanting to hear what he was foretelling and needing to be cleansed of their sins. He cried out like a crazy man, yet they hung on his every word. Yes, they must have murmured among themselves when John told them they must repent. Some lamented their past. It was such a mixed crowd, many were quick to express themselves. John told them to prepare for the one who was coming. Surely he was not speaking of the Messiah. Surely not. But when John told them that the one who was following him would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire, they caught their breaths. They knew that John was speaking God's truth. His words were true. They could not speak a word. So touched by John's words that everyone in the crowd stopped as though their hearts had stopped. They were touched to their very

core. They were truly still as never before. My friends, that was the most profound of Advent moments.

Advent is a time of waiting. The Latin root of the word advent is coming. The four Sundays before Christmas and days between speak to the longing and the hope for the coming of the Savior. Our season of Advent is more than waiting for our son's concert to start, more than waiting for Mandy Patinkin's one-man show to begin – although they both are advents of happy anticipation. Our Christian Advent is more than waiting for enjoyable events that come in our lives and surely more than results of lab tests to come in the mail or the pathologist to report on a biopsy. Waiting for Christmas, waiting for Jesus to be born in us anew every year is beyond our human experiences and beyond our understanding.

As Christians we are optimistic as we wait this year with hope in the promise of the resurrected Christ Jesus who comes to save us, again and again. We look forward to Christmas because we hope we know what God has in store for us in our lives and the lives of all those we love and of the lives of all God's people (whether they know it or not). But do we really understand the hope that Advent offers us?

To finish the Doodle-doo story at the theatre in D.C., a couple came late to see Mandy Patinkin's performance of *Dress Casual*. Their seats were in row three in the center front of the orchestra. They were creeping down the aisle trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, which was impossible. Mandy Patinkin stopped singing and walked all the way down the proscenium towards them. He motioned for them to take their seats as they crawled over two couples to sit down. And then Mr. Patinkin spoke directly to them. He said: "Let me tell you where we are... the ghost light came up. It got really, really quiet in this big hall. Then my accompanist came out and sat at the piano. He played a little of my first song. I came out from backstage singing when the red-red robin comes bob-bob-bobbin' along. I was on the second verse and that's when you came in." Wouldn't it be nice if we had someone to tell us what happened before we joined the Jesus Movement – our Presiding Bishop calls us the Episcopal branch of the Jesus

Movement. And that movement started as John was predicting his coming, and the world came into a profound silence waiting for our Lord to come. The story is continuous even though it begins anew every year in Advent.

Marcus Borg spoke of the “unending conversation” that began with John the Baptizer and the coming of Jesus. He said:

Imagine you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before.

You listen for a while; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.¹

Dear ones, whether we arrive on time or we are late to the party, we can be still and know that we are part of this ongoing conversation telling the greatest story of all time. The Lord is coming to us again this year. And we are loved whether we have waited in silence or not. God is coming. God’s love is pouring over us right now. And all we need do is prepare as we are able and wait for the Lord, whose day is near.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. Borg was New Testament scholar, theologian and author. He received his D. Phil. from Oxford University. He cited the American literary theorist Kenneth Burke, as the inspiration of the metaphor of a parlor conversation and Christianity’s role in religion longevity.