



“A CHILD IS BORN...”

December 3, 2017, The First Sunday in Advent

Ecclesiastes 1:4-9, Matthew 18:1-5

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“Puer natus est nobis.” “A child is born to us.” The theologian Thomas Moore notes that these are the opening words of the midnight mass on Christmas in the Roman Catholic Church. Moore goes on to note, “The Latin word for *child* here is *puer*, a word often used by the Romans to describe a youth and used later by C. G. Jung to name the spirit of youth that is an essential part of us all. *Puer* is not simply literal young age, but an attitude of youthfulness that may be full of spirit, ambition, high destiny, and a forgetfulness of mortality.”¹

As we gather in worship today, we find ourselves at a distinct juncture. We have recently completed celebrating our vaunted 250 years of faithful ministry together. We have just finished thanking Michael Lindvall for his gifted leadership over the past 15 years. Tonight we will light the trees along Park Avenue and sing Christmas Carols for the 73rd time. We are a congregation proud of its heritage and traditions and seek to continually honor them. All of these things remind us of who we have been and who we are.

But we also stand poised for a new era in the life of this congregation. We await new leadership. And our liturgical calendar directs us to the future, to who we will be. Today is the first Sunday in Advent and the beginning of a new liturgical year.

This time of year is always a bit of a complex concoction. It is a time of both nostalgia and expectation. Many of us recollect back to Christmas seasons past. We have hallowed family traditions about when the tree goes up and who gets to put the star on top. We serve the same meal on Christmas day that has been served



since our grandmothers ran the kitchen back in the day. But there is also expectation. And there is no greater expectation than the fever pitch of children as they breathlessly await what is to come on that blessed morning. The days are counted down with glee as they await what new treasures they will discover. The endless possibilities of presents are giddy.

I would not be so glib as to say the future of Brick Church can be compared to a pile of presents nestled beneath the boughs of a Christmas tree. But I will say we should turn our faces toward the days to come with the expectation and anticipation that come with the gift of youth.

In our first Scripture lesson this morning we heard those world-weary words from Ecclesiastes, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.” For those of us that have been alive for several or more decades, this perfectly describes the ennui we all experience at one time or another. The days can indeed run together. Routines can begin to feel like an endless hike on a treadmill leading nowhere. True, forward motion appears to be elusive. We can begin to doubt that the actions that fill our days are necessarily leading anywhere.

The season of Advent is a response to all of that. Our ennui is interrupted by the annunciation. An announcement from our God that a new thing is about to break into the world, and not just a new thing but a new presence of the divine found in the form of our mortal existence. God is arriving in our midst within the very flesh we inhabit. And this presence promises to change absolutely everything.

In our second reading this morning we heard the disciples ask Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” His answer is surprising to them. In the culture of ancient Palestine, children were considered to be of limited value. They were not prized as they are in our culture today. But Jesus places a child in their midst and announces to them, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” He speaks to them of the



humility of children but that notion of humility has much larger implications. When we experience ennui in our lives, part of it, is driven by our arrogance, our belief that we understand all the ways of the world. We have seen all there is to see. We know all of the outcomes. An element of youthful humility comes with an understanding that they do not know all of the ways of the world. It allows children to have the magnificent freedom of their imaginations. The fantastical is an everyday occurrence. Perhaps streetlights illuminate the streets we walk because they are filled with friendly fireflies protecting us from the dark.

As well, and perhaps more importantly, what awaits them tomorrow is wide open with possibility for them. Who knows what might happen? Who knows what they might learn? Who knows in what way they might be surprised by what will come next? The wide-eyed optimism that children are capable of possessing is remarkable.

Now, none of us is able to snap our fingers and reclaim the imagination and optimism of youth. But I do think the season of Advent offers us an opportunity to turn in this direction. I opened this sermon with the line, “Puer natus est nobis.” “A child is born to us.” But I think it is fair to also offer a slight shift. Thanks to Mario Verdolini and his son Alex, I have learned that there is another way this can be translated, “Puer natus est in nobis” can also be understood as “A child is born in us.” When the Divine deigns to take on human form, it is not done in order to merely inhabit our vicinity but to literally find a home within us. In this season as we pray for the arrival of new life in the form of an infant savior, we are also praying for new life within ourselves. We are called to welcome and recognize the vast potential God’s saving grace has to transform who each of us is individually and who we are together. We are invited into what Thomas Moore calls a “renaissance of possibility.”²

We as a congregation are in a time of change. There are new things ahead for us that cannot be seen just yet. And we have a choice as to how we approach this moment. We could be fearful and anxious because we do not know exactly how



things will unfold. We could stubbornly grasp how we have always done things and refuse any notion of change. Or we could allow for a youthful spirit to be born in us. We could let our imaginations free to dream about new and exciting ways to be faithful together. We could daydream about possibilities. We could recognize that God's abiding presence promises great faithfulness in our future together.

One of the reasons I love Brick Church is how much we take pride in our history. We stand strong in our traditions and are mindful of those who have built this remarkable foundation upon which we stand together. We have always been committed to formal worship done well, to education for all ages, to mission to the city, and to fellowship together. These traditions have been passed on from generation to generation. And part of that tradition has been one of not standing still. We have literally been a congregation on the move. We started as a little offshoot of First Presbyterian on a triangular lot by Park Row, Beekman, and Nassau streets. But as the years went by the population of the city moved north until Brick Church found itself separated from the people it served. So we moved forward, or in this case, northward to the corner of 37th Street and Fifth Avenue. And then once again this congregation heard the call to move and found a home here on the corner of Park Avenue and 91st Street.

For the life of me, I cannot imagine any reason in our future that we would be moving from the corner of Park Avenue and 91st but we are called to imagine the other ways that we can move forward in who we are as a community of faith. And as we do that I know that we will continue to seek the best ways that we can be faithful in our worship, education, mission, and fellowship for the time and place we stand right now. And we will place an eye toward the future and how we will continue these traditions in the years to come.

We stand on this remarkable foundation of 250 years of faithful community. But this foundation was not created for us to rest on our laurels. This foundation was created that we might continue to build, continue to reach higher in all that we do together, continue to respond to the changing world around us.



In this Advent season let us pray for this spirit of youth within us. We may be 250 years old but that does not preclude us from continuing to grow. In his poem “East Coker” in *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot wrote,

“Old men ought to be explorers
here and there does not matter
we must be still and still moving
into another intensity
for a further union, a deeper communion”

Let us bring a youthful imagination and sense of possibility to our life of faith together. Let us allow God’s spirit to intrigue us enough to dream about how we can continue to allow our strength of tradition to speak in the years to come.

Welcome to Advent. When Jesus Christ prepares to enter into the world, and into each of us. There is indeed something new under the sun. “Puer natus est nobis.” “A child is born to us.” “Puer natus est in nobis.” “A child is born in us.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Moore, Thomas, *Original Self*, Perennial, New York, 2000, page 29.

² Moore, Thomas, *Original Self*, page 31.