

Dec 3, 2023 – Online, Advent 1 Bonni-Belle Pickard

Preservice music:

Longing for light (Christ be our light)

Earth's creator (Everyday God)

In the darkness of the still night (Creator God) (StF 109)

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship

Advent Candle liturgy

Advent Candles tell their story – StF 165

Intro to scripture reading

Mark 13: 24-37

Intro to John The Baptist monologue

The Beaten Path monologue

Into the darkness – StF 173

Intercessions

Earth's creator (Everyday God)

Benediction: come be with us....

This year, our Methodist connexion has provided Advent and Christmas resources
With the title 'Out of the Ordinary'.
They encourage us to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open
For how we might witness God's presence in our daily lives.

Opening liturgy

Our Advent ring stands waiting, for candlelight to lead us on.
We'll open up traditions, with challenge and with change.
Advent God, challenge us today.

Our box of decorations stands ready to be explored.
We reassess the treasures in this bulging cardboard box.
Let's sort the treasure from the trash the needed from the not.
Advent God, challenge us today.

Our living is refocused with preparations underway.
Our ordinary and everyday will be challenged along the way.
Letting go of stuff to do God's will, is here to stay.
Advent God, challenge us today.

In the mundane and ordinary, stars will start to fall,
challenging and changing us with holy goodness breaking through.
Advent God, challenge us today.

Advent God, as we light this, our first Advent candle
may we let go of what swamps us and serves no purpose for us,
so that we can meet the challenges that lie ahead of us.
May our ordinary lives be enriched by your extraordinary love for us

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In the lectionary reading for today, we come upon a rather terrifying scripture –
One that speaks of the world falling apart!
Too often we feel like our own worlds – either our private or the public world –
Is truly falling apart.
This scripture reminds us that God is indeed there in the midst of terrifying times,
That often it is precisely the terrifying times
That cause us to look around and find God with us in the midst of the terror.

In the connexional resources for this year – the ‘Out of the Ordinary’ –
We’re also encouraged to consider how our extraordinary God
Is found in and amongst the ordinary things of life –
Like the fig tree we’ll hear about in Mark’s gospel story –
Or the act of locking up one’s house and going away on a journey –
Or the cockcrow in the morning
Mark encourages us to ‘stay awake’ to see how God is at work in the ordinary things...

Mark 13: 24-37

‘But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory.
Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds,
from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

‘From the fig tree learn its lesson:
as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves,
you know that summer is near.
So also, when you see these things taking place,
you know that he is near, at the very gates.
Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.
Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘But about that day or hour no one knows,
neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.
Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.
It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge,
each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.
Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come,
in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,
or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.
And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

‘Keep awake’ – keep an eye out for God in our midst –

Many of you will remember that last year during Advent,
I presented a set of monologues portraying the women listed in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus

I won’t be doing all of Advent this year,
And our lectionary readings come from Mark’s gospel,
Which has no account of the Christmas story as we know it.

Mark’s gospel starts instead with the story of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry,
And even with the story of John the Baptist
Who figured prominently in Jesus recognising his own call to ministry.

I’m presenting then today a monologue I wrote many years ago
About a woman who encountered John the Baptist.

As with last year’s Matthew monologues,
This one is based on the scripture story,
But it’s also a product of my imagination –
The creativity capacity that God gives each of us humans to create –
To imagine, to wonder what it’s like to be in another’s position.

I use this story today because the woman in it is going about her ordinary life
But hearing about something rather extraordinary –
Which initially she rejects – too much bother!

What she hears seems like a threat to the routine of her daily life that has served her well.

When she hears a call to change, she, like so many of us, rejects it.
Why should I change the way I do things? I’m getting along fairly well...

And yet, there is often something niggling – by sticking with my well-worn routine,
Am I missing out on what’s really important?
Might there be something extraordinary available that I have previously rejected?

Listen with me:

Prayers:

Lord God of all our houses
The clean ones and the messy ones,
The big ones and the small ones,
The noisy ones and the quiet ones,
We invite you to come and be with us.

We don't invite you casually, Lord,
Because we know from your reputation
That your presence could change us –
And change is something that scares us.
We'd all like to think we're fine just as we are.
But we know deep down, we're not.

So, come, Lord Jesus, and make your home with us.
Come, Lord Jesus, and show us what's possible with you.

Lord, we pray for all the other households we know as well –
We pray for those who are lonely
And those who are so busy they can't find a minute for themselves.
We pray for those whose homes are not places of safety
For those whose homes are tense with disagreement
Or struggling with abuse in any of its private or public forms.
We pray for those who have no homes
Because of warfare or natural disaster
Or economic hardship or estrangement.
We pray for those whose lives are in danger
Because of alcohol or drug use
Whether their own or someone near to them.

Lord, our world is crying out for peace and justice,
But we also find ourselves demanding our own ways –
Which in the long run are anything but peaceful or just.

When it seems like everything has turned against us,
Come again to our homes, Lord,
And turn us towards you.
Come, Lord Jesus, and bring us to you. Amen.

The Beaten Path (A Woman in John the Baptist's Time) by Bonni-Belle Pickard, Advent

What? You're still here?
Not running off to the desert
Like the rest of them?
They've all gone:
The old ones, the young ones,
The men,
The children following along,
Even the women!

Well, you won't find this old woman
Running off to the wilderness
To see that crazy man,
Especially with all the work to be done!
Floors to clean!
Bread to bake!
Even my daughters-in-law have run off,
Left all the work to me!

And it's the DESERT they run to!
The sheep run off to the desert
To get themselves lost!
And the desert is where the demons stay!
Devils!
Wild animals!
No roof to shade from the scorching sun,
No walls to keep out the frozen starry sky.
Grown men lose their senses
Out in the desert..
Only the prophets can survive that madness,
But Elijah is long gone,
And it's been so long since another's come...

Of course, they say this new one
Is Elijah come again.
This one,
John, I think they call him,
Wears 'prophet clothes'
And eats 'prophet food';
But he says such strange things!
He acts like we Jews are the ones
who have to change,
Like we're the ones causing all the problems.
Hasn't he seen what the Romans are doing to us?
After all we've been through
He says, "WE have to change:
"Make the path straight," he says!

Well, I'll tell you this:

The path is there
Because that's the easiest way to get around.
And it's well-worn because it works.
The well-worn path
Is the one that keeps us going
From here to there
Without going crazy in this madness.

Everybody knows the path
Even the cows and the sheep follow it:
Just follow the beaten path.
Who has time to straighten it out?
There are floors to sweep,
Food to cook
Dishes to wash
Clothes to wash
Clothes to mend....

Of course, if you're just going to eat
Locusts and wild honey,
Then I guess there's plenty of time
For straightening out paths
But this family likes a little barley and olive oil,
Goat's milk and cheese;
And that means the goats have to be milked
And the cheese has to be made by SOMEONE,
And this family wants their floors swept
And their sleeping mates straightened out,
And somebody's got to do it!
So, I tell you
If all the work is going to get done,
If you're going to get from here to there,
You use the beaten path.
The old ways are best.

But what do the young ones know?
Some new guy goes out to the wilderness
And starts saying crazy things
And they all run out to see,
Well, let them go—
Go jump in the water
And get baptized by this crazy guy!
Now THERE's a crazy idea: BAPTIZED!
Just like they were some gentile heathens
Trying to become one of us.
FOREIGNERS they are, stealing all the ripe figs off the trees,
all the sweet ripe girls from the good families –
GENTILES they are,
whose ancestors never wandered through the wilderness—
God gave US the land.

These others come and try to become Jews
By being baptized!
And then this guy says
We JEWS have to be baptized!
As if we weren't already God's chosen ones...

Not they tell me everyone is down there by the Jordan
Confessing their sins to everyone.
Well, my Zanaiah did all the confessions for this family
When he was alive,
And now my sons do it,
But they've always done it privately
When they went to the Temple.
None of this public spewing out of Family Matters.
This is a respectable family
And we've kept ourselves
Respectable.

Now I hear that even some of the WOMEN
Are going down to be baptized!
With all those folks around!
Confessing in public!
It's too much for an old woman like me.
Give me beaten paths,
Give me respectability
Give me floors to sweep...

Clean floors –
Yes, my daughters-in-law did seem to remember
Him saying something about clean floors,
Though little they would know
About cleaning floors themselves!
This John fellow was talking about
One who was coming after him—
That he would be cleaning the floors
Of the threshing hall,
Storing the grain,
Sweeping out the chaff.
Well, if the one who's coming
Knows about clean floors,
Then I like that!

Throw out the chaff
The foreigners,
Those horrible Romans and Gentiles!
Throw them all out, Yahweh!
We're your people, Yahweh!
Turn them out so we can live respectable lives!

Ha! I'd like to have been there
When those Pharisees and Sadducees
Came to see that John guy.
They say he called them
Sons of Snakes.
Ha! That's a good one!
I can just see them crawling along
On their bellies in the dust!
All those rules they follow
And try to make US follow --
More and more rules
Of THEIR Kind of respectability
Trying to make us ashamed of ourselves.
A clean floor: that's respectability!

My sons say John told the Pharisees
That had to do the things
That showed they had turned back to God.
Maybe the Pharisees don't know
That God likes clean floors,
So they keep making up new rules.

But then I heard my sons saying
That John had told them that if they didn't change
God would raise up children of Abraham
From the stones!
Have you ever heard anything so crazy?
Most of the children of Abraham have been 'raised up'
From nights spent on stone floors anyway,
But it still takes good Jewish Seed
To raise up children of Abraham!

The other part I didn't understand
Was about the axe being ready
To cut down trees that don't bear good fruit—
Well, that makes sense,
If he's talking about all the bad seeds coming
How can bad seed bear good fruit?
But they seem to think
He's says we Jews are subject
To this same axe!

Well, I've borne good fruit:
Six sons
Three daughters,
Buried five of them
Along with my Zanaiah,
But I've done my part, God!
I've lit the Sabbath candles
And kept the fires burning.

I've kept this house clean
Through dust storms and muddy feet,
Goats and disease,
Through the hardships
Of Romans and foreigners,
Through my mother-in-law
and daughters-in-law,
through children and grandchildren:
I've kept it clean!
And now they all leave me alone
To run out to the desert after this fool.
But I've kept this house clean, Lord!
I've followed the beaten path,
I've born good fruit!
Wil you cut me down, too?

What I really can't understand,
Is why they all come back looking so happy every day?
They 're just bubbling full of noise and laughter!
They come back dancing,
Dusty feet all over the clean floors!
Can't stop babbling
about how they feel so relieved from their burden --
So they make more burdens for me!
Was there ever a time
When there weren't burdens for me?
How can they be so happy?
How can they keep...
Singing?
They say he talks about the axe cutting down
And judgment
And burning in fire,
But they come back happy!
So full of life!

They talk about the Promised One coming,
As if after waiting for 4000 years
They think he's coming HERE and NOW!
Well, if he comes here,
This will be the only clean hours in the village.
My house is clean.

One problem with a clean house is...
It's so.... quiet.
It's so quiet
When they've all gone away.
I almost miss the babbling.
I wonder...
Do they miss this nagging old woman?
Maybe they're glad to be rid of me for a while

But someone's got to keep the fire burning
And those floors clean
And the path beaten;
Someone's got to keep the family respectable!
We can't all go running off
To see the crazy man in the desert.

My house is clean.
And now there's the marketing to do ...
The market's on the beaten path and...
The desert just a few steps further.
Maybe there's time to go see
What all the fuss is about
It's just a few steps from the beaten path....