

**St Andrew's Episcopal Church**  
**The Reverend Barbara A. Hutchinson**  
**Advent 1 Year B**

Advent is a time of looking backwards, yet living forward. Advent is a time when we look back to that baby in swaddling clothes in the manger, yet live into the risen Christ, present in our lives this very moment. Even though the popular hype in our media during this season of Advent is either focused on Santa Claus and excessive commercialism, or if Christian values do sneak in at all during this season, we focus on an over-romanticized birth narrative, and allow the carols or other cues to set off our imaginations, to an evening of birth which inaugurated a world of peace on earth and good will for all.

But that wasn't the world Jesus was born into, and neither is it our world today. We do not have peace on earth nor good will for all. We are still in this in-between time, this threshold time, which is so well characterized by the season of Advent.

These threshold times in our lives, our advent moments demand from us a particular spiritual maturity to notice them and then to walk into and through them, allowing the old to be cast away, while embracing the new to be born within us.

Our gospel reading contains the "little apocalypse", or Jesus' prediction of the end times. In this prediction, Jesus is saying something very clear to us. When we follow Christ, like our patron saint, Andrew, When we lay down our nets and walk into something completely unknown, it may very well feel like our own personal end time. We may not expect this sense of cosmic shift, so Jesus is preparing us.

For this cosmic event Jesus speaks of happens day by day in our personal lives, or in our nation, or in our global society. It happens when the old is stripped away from us and when at first this is all we see, but then something new is offered and we catch the glimpse of new life, the Advent moment, the second when the fig leaf is just budding out, and we choose to walk over that threshold, into something brand new.

Jesus is speaking about the end times, but not from a place of judgment and exclusion of others, as is often done today by some faith denominations when the word apocalypse is mentioned. But rather Jesus is showing us how to be faithful: how to live in the midst of despair, knowing that all things known to us may pass away ,but Jesus' words, Jesus' presence, and God's love will be with us, already creating new life.

Jennifer gave us an amazing testimony to this faithfulness last week. She began by speaking about the "end times" experience she and her family had when she was diagnosed with cancer. There was lament (days of tears), there was despair (questions from her children whether she would die), there was turmoil; her whole world came crashing down. For a bit. She could have stayed there. She could have given up on God. She could have shut herself

off from the new beginning Christ was already working in her life. It's easy to do, and many choose this route. But she didn't. She found the threshold and walked over it. Her faithfulness allowed her look for that Christ, whom she found in the love, prayers, and acts of kindness we offered her. Her Advent moment was born in her diagnosis of cancer, and she crossed the threshold into that new beginning with strength, with the power of Christ. She gave up her old way of thinking: she was too young, too careful about what she ate; too vigilant in her exercise to get cancer; She let it go; and when she did; she allowed something new to be formed within her.

We are faithful when we look for the advent moments in our lives, the thresholds we are being invited to step over in order to enter into something new. Sometimes we will find them in our moments of despair, when our worlds come crashing down around us. One image of threshold which came to my mind, when I was exploring the connection between Advent and threshold moments, was actually a place which held that which was threshed – a barn, with wheat stored on the second floor. And when that floor, that which had divided the space, gave away, and the wheat came tumbling down, there was mass confusion, chaos, and concern. When your world feels like this, please know, there is a threshold you have just crossed and there is a new beginning awaiting you. Because of Christ, there is a new beginning inherently build into every ending. That's the promise of resurrection. Hold onto that assurance. It's been given to you by Christ.

Not perhaps surprisingly, we also encounter threshold moments in our times of joy. Probably the image, which came to your mind when I said the word threshold, was of a groom carrying his bride over the threshold into their honeymoon suite or new home, to signify a new beginning, a new relationship in married life.

Now the “so what” part of this sermon is that we as Christians are called to be attentive to, watchful of, and patient in our waiting for these threshold moments in our lives. To live in this heightened state of awareness means we will often live with eyes focused on the dance between equilibrium and disequilibrium in our lives, or in my favorite words, deconstruction and reconstruction. For that which is solid will come to an end, the end times will happen, and we will be broken apart, and something new and transforming will be released into the world. This is our reality as Christians and as a Christian community.

This dance between disequilibrium and equilibrium can be hard for us, because it means change. And even good change, can be hard. I know there are some days, often toward the end of a long week, when I come home and say, “Why can't things stay the same for just one day!”

For as a parish priest, I see many of the moments of disequilibrium or deconstruction, of the old being broken apart, and the anxiety and lament which often surrounds that. I also see many moments of reconstruction, of a new equilibrium being formed, when new life

and ministry emerges. They both are of God and they both release the Holy Spirit into our midst, and of course, that means we can never control the outcome, just be present to the change.

I don't think any of us really want all things to stay the same always, but by the same token, it can be unsettling when we have to let go of some things that used to be.

I hear some of you lament and I feel your pain. I hear comments such as, "There was a time when it was a privilege to be on altar guild and we had five teams and now we only have 4 teams and no one wants to step up and be the chair".

Something has been let go of and it was something you cared about, and now there's grief or anxiety. And yet I see the reconstruction simultaneously happening in the emergence of our deepening healing ministry, or the number of people gathered to meditate each week, or the 100 people who assist in leading worship. The energy's still here, it's just been relocated. Some things are being let go of and others are emerging.

Or I hear or feel the pain of some members having left our parish and you don't know how to understand it nor comprehend how God was a part of that too and that Christ is with them now, breaking open new possibilities of being, as well as new possibilities here at our parish as we welcome new friends into our common life.

It's a dance, isn't it?

I hear laments, "there used to be a time when there weren't sports on Sunday, or a time when people just came in and painted a wall if they saw it needed painting, and I hear fear, anxiety, and lament that it's not true anymore. And yet, I see more children more consistently than ever in our Godly Play classes and an amazing youth choir. So there's lament and anxiety and yet God creating something new.

Whether you've been here 2 weeks or 2 years, or 20 years, you can probably look back at a time when things were different, and you may be feeling some disequilibrium as we move toward a new equilibrium. you may yearn for things to be comfortable or solid again.

But you probably know this ~

God doesn't work in the comfortable or solid. God works in the threshold times of new possibilities. So perhaps a life in Christ is not finding an equilibrium to hold onto, nor trying to control the stasis, but of knowing it's a constant process, it is a dance, that we must rely on our spiritual maturity to lead us through.

For when we trust with a maturity, we know that for in everything that is pulled apart, there will be a budding or blooming of the Spirit, and which like the bud from the fig tree, when exposed, will herald the summer. This holy place of the new emerging and the old disappearing is where we are in each and every moment, in this season of Advent, and in our lives with Christ.

What in our lives, in our thinking, in our feelings, or our actions, is God inviting us to let go of, so that what is God: love, hope, joy, reconciliation, peace, and good will toward all, can bud and bloom in our lives?

For each of us it will be something different. It may be something you grew up thinking, either from what you learned in Sunday school, or in your neighborhood, or on the lap on your grandfather, and yet now it rubs up against what you know of Christ, in a new light you've been given, and you've avoided going there to explore.

I have a wonderful example of how God did this work in my heart that I'd love to share with you at coffee hour and I actually have a visual that reflects the transformation of that which happened in my heart. Now's the time to do that holy work, whatever your particular work happens to be.

It may be a long-nursed resentment, that's been eating at your soul, and now's the time to deal with it. Or it could be something terrible you've done, and you do want to be forgiven of it, but you're not sure how. Use this advent time of watching and waiting for the right thing to do and the right time to do it, so that the new birth within you can be celebrated at Christ's birth.

Our faithful response is to cross that threshold with Christ, and never go back. God puts thresholds in front of us all the time, to trip our old way of thinking up, so we can walk into a new way of understanding.

We can take this bigger and also look at the thresholds in our societal life. Ones we successfully walk through, like the decision this past week at UVA to take a stance against violence against women on their campus and to protect their rights, and others that we weren't ready yet to cross over this week. The later are the ones we need to intentionally pray into and through.

This week when the verdict came out not to indict Officer Wilson in the killing of Michael Brown, my instant instinct was to fall down on my knees and beg for God's forgiveness that once again we did not cross the threshold toward justice and equality for all. Now I don't claim to have any special knowledge of the truth in that situation. I figure there are only 2 people who know what really happened and one is dead, so we can only rely on the facts given; and you may have come to a different conclusion than I did, and that's okay.

I'm much more interested in your spiritual response to the decision. I just know what God said to me "Get on your knees and ask for forgiveness.: Discard the complacency in your heart, which allowed you to expect and almost be okay with a decision that you believe is unjust. What did God say to you? What is the work God has given you? What do you need to pull apart so that something new of God may be born, within us, and into our world.

We as individuals and we as your leadership here look for the threshold moments in our parish life. And with Christ, we step into and through them.

At the end of each vestry meeting, we answer the following questions:

**What are the concerns –**

Which means, where is the anxiety, for usually when you follow anxiety, you fall into the places where something is being cast aside, where God is deconstructing something, in order for new life to emerge.

**Where did you find God present?**

Where is the risen Christ right now in our midst? Like Jennifer, we need to be expectant that Christ will be here.

**What were the highlights of the parish this past month –** which tells us where is the new emerging?

We are in a threshold time, Perhaps we always are, as that's the correct advent stance of being Christians. Sometimes we sit in discomfort. Sometimes we dance in joy. We will find God and new opportunities in each. But let us remain posed and ready to embrace the new leaf emerging this season. May we do this faithfully with Christ and in community.  
Amen.