December 2021

Dear friends in the journey,

As I write we are once again in the season of Advent. One thing I love about the church calendar is that is cyclical. We return to the same season each year, but each year we are different (and the world is different) as we enter it.

Traditionally Advent was a time of preparation (derived from the word “adventus” which means “the coming”) as we remember the great mystery of God becoming incarnate in Jesus and coming into our world (and into our lives).

But it is also a time of preparation for the final coming of Jesus the Christ when there will be an end to all things – the end of our lives, the end of all of our endeavors, the end of all our hopes and dreams – when all things will be reckoned to God (meaning that an accounting will need to be given for all that has happened).

So as a season, it invites us into a kind of dual consciousness of living in the present (what does it mean for Jesus to come into the world today) and preparing for a future we have not yet seen (what crooked paths will need to be made straight in our lives and in the world).

In northern climates, Advent also occurs during a time where creation goes still during the difficult cold months. For many creatures, this is a kind of reckoning in and of itself, and all of creation has developed strategies for survival during these harsher times.

Correspondingly the church has developed practices to help us “survive” spiritually.  In addition to encouraging us to be still and quiet the mind and heart, the church encourages fasting, almsgiving and prayer. These Advent disciplines help us prepare to live during end times – whether personal or collective - and help us live on life’s terms in the here and now.

As part of this season, Spiritus is hosting a series to help us focus. This month’s guidelines will vary a little from the usual format and will instead incorporate a bit from the reflection series. In these guidelines, we will offer a reflection from 3 spirit guides who will help us tune in more deeply during this season. Each will be paired with a scripture to help us reflect, and some reflection questions will be offered.

A little more background:

The ancients who came before us had a very different sense of this season. Their focus was more aligned with what was happening in the world around them. They did not have the luxuries that we do or the distractions of online shopping or going to malls for gifts! Instead they looked to the sky and saw and felt the coming cold and dark. They knew that their survival was on the line.

Our bodies probably still hold vestiges of this response - although we have likely lost our ability to name and recognize what is happening. But the deep spiritual traditions of Advent were developed in order to help us prepare for lean times and, ultimately, for an end to all times.

The darkness of this season reminds us of the death which we all face and that all of the created order faces (especially during the harshness of the winter months). But we are reminded that death is but a door, and there is something on the other side.

Sadly Christmas has become so highly commercialized that we have lost its origins and original meanings. It has become about things versus soul-preparation. Yet the ancient disciplines of fasting, almsgiving and prayer were three of the ways that the church helped people prepare. These helped us to shape ourselves to fit life as it is given – not necessarily life as we would like it.

Wishing you a blessed Advent, and may these guides take us deeper into the spiritual life so that we may be gifts to the world around us!

Blessings,

Mike Boucher

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**Guide #1: Howard Thurman[[1]](#footnote-1)**

How Good To Center Down!

How good it is to center down!

To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!

The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;

Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,

While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment

and the resting lull.

With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense

of order in our living;

A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion

and bring meaning in our chaos.

We look at ourselves in this waiting moment –

the kinds of people we are.

The questions persist:  what are we doing with our lives? –

    what are the motives that order our days?

What is the end of our doings?

Where are we trying to go?

Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?

For what end do we make sacrifices?

Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.

As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence,

   there is a sound of another kind –

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

It moves directly to the core of our being.

Our questions are answered,

Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round

With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down!

* Howard Thurman (from Meditations of the Heart)

**Mark 6:31**

*Jesus said, “Come off by yourselves; let’s take a break and get a little rest.” For there was constant coming and going.”*

**Matthew 6:6**

*“Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place…Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense God’s grace.”*

**Reflection Question:**

What came up for you as you read ‘Center Down’? How might this apply to your life these days?

**Guide #2: Robin Wall Kimmerer[[2]](#footnote-2)**

“Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy.”

“In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out.”

“And when I think about mosses, in particular, as the most ancient of land plants, they have been here for a very long time. They’ve figured out a lot about how to live well on the earth, and, for me, I think they’re really good storytellers in the way that they live. An example of what I mean by this is in their simplicity, in the power of being small; mosses become so successful all over the world because they live in these tiny little layers on rocks, on logs, and on trees. They work with the natural forces that lie over every little surface of the world, and to me, they are exemplars of not only surviving, but flourishing by working with natural processes. Mosses are superb teachers about living within your means.”

**Matthew 5:5**

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

**Reflection Question:**

How much do you think about plants and trees as spiritual teachers? What might they offer you for reflection this season?

**Guide #3: Animal Guides**[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Painted Turtle**: *“One day in the fall, as water and air cooled, at some precise temperature an ancient bell sounded in the turtle brain. A signal: take a deep breath. Each creature slipped off her lo g and swam for the warmer muck bottom. Stroking her way through the woven walls of plant stems, she found her bottom place. She closed her eyes and dug into the mud. She buried herself…Her heart slowed – and slowed – almost to stopping. Her body temperature dropped – and stopped just short of freezing. Now, beneath a layer of mud, beneath the weight of frigid water and its skin of ice and skim of snow, everything in her has gone so still she does not need to breathe…And waits…It’s this radical simplicity that will save her. And deep within it, at the heart of her stillness, something she has no need to name, but something we might call trust: that one day, yes, the world will warm again, and with it, her life.”*

**Muskrat:** *“Muskrat is no winter napper…Unlike his cousin the northern beaver, he has stored no food for the winter…So today and every winter day he has no choice but to dive beneath the ice for the plants that still grow on the bottomlands..[but]…he has to surface in the middle of the pond to warm up. So from beneath the ice he’s built a refuge – a push-up it’s called – by pushing sticks and stalks up through cracks in the ice into a heap, a mound. He pushes his body up into the mounded shelter, shakes his fur dry and shivers to raise his body temperature. He allows others to join him – even non-kin – for the precious extra heat of a group huddle…Retreating to his dark rooms to rest and breathe – sometimes alone, often with others – this is how he survives the months of cold…”*

**Matthew 6:26, 28**

*Look at the birds of the air…and look at the wild flowers*

**Reflection Question:**

What animals are you connected to or notice in your every day life? What teachings might they offer you during this season?

1. Howard Washington Thurman was an American author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. As a prominent religious figure, he played a leading role in many social justice movements and organizations of the twentieth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robin Wall Kimmerer is an American Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental and Forest Biology; and Director, Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Taken from Gayle Boss’ All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings. This is a beautiful Advent book providing reflections on 25 animals. I highly recommend it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)