

Title: Tensions & Traditions

Date: 12/17/2023 (Advent 6, formerly known as Advent 3, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#); [John 1:6-8,19-28](#); [Psalm 126](#); [Canticle 15](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Advent-6-Sermon-Tensions--Traditions-e2dc3mk>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/PXOTmp9opa4?t=1785>

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations. (Isa 61:11)
Amen.

Advent and Christmas are seasons filled with traditions.

There is the tradition of counting down to Christmas, either with an Advent wreath or an Advent calendar. There are traditions around when we choose to decorate our tree and how. There are traditional carols that we will *rehearse* tonight during fireside Christmas.

I emphasized the word “rehearse” because in church there is a certain group of traditionalists we lovingly refer to as the Advent Police. While playing the part of St. Nicholas, one of my friends chose to wear socks with huge capital letters that spelled out, “BAH HUMBUG!”

The Advent Police firmly hold the line that Christmas doesn't begin until Christmas Eve. Not until then are ornaments allowed to appear on the tree, nor the baby Jesus in the nativity scene. They *defend* this defined period of waiting against the rapid advance of Christmas in our stores and homes and churches. They passionately push back against the rush to get ready for Christmas to make sure that we have the space and time we need to reflect and return to the Lord.

At the same time, some argue that getting an early start on Christmas gives us a reason to celebrate and come together when things are hard, when joy and good cheer are sorely needed. Why not start proclaiming the good news and bind up the brokenhearted? There is no day like today to remind ourselves that we are called to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. There is no time like now to start contemplating what it means to proclaim the year 2024 as the year of the Lord's favor.

As people of the Middle Way, as people who build our faith on the three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason, this is the kind of tension we face at this time of the year. We remind other people and ourselves that this isn't so much about being right as being right with God, as doing things with an intentionality that is in line with God's intentions for us and for the world.

Our role is not to judge, but to be curious and to wonder why. God will not strike us with lightning if our Christmas tree is already up, AND it's good to wonder why we're feeling rushed. What's going to break if we waited just a bit longer?

God will not rain down fire if we are already playing Christmas music, AND I've really appreciated that more people are coming up with Advent playlists, compiling Christian and non-Christian songs about waiting. It's amazing to go from Bon Jovi to Patsy Cline to Aretha Franklin to Avicii.ⁱ

As we get ready to remember the First Coming and prepare for the Second, through the words of the prophet Isaiah, we hear very clearly that God cares about the **here and now**. Yes, Jesus speaks about a future judgment AND God has sent him to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy to proclaim good news to the oppressed and release to the captives, to give a garland and the oil of gladness to those who mourn. The ancient ruins will be rebuilt, not abandoned, and the devastation of many generations will be repaired; their generational trauma shall be healed.

Just as John was very clear that he is not the light but came to testify to the light, that he was not the Messiah nor Elijah nor the prophet, let us be clear that neither are we. We respond to them and we point toward them but we are not them; we don't have to be them. So, we give ourselves permission to count ourselves among the brokenhearted or the captive, among those who mourn or those who have recovered and now seek to repair former devastations.

In these moments, let us remember that God is with us, and God wants things to be different for us. To be a martyr means to witness to God's mercy and grace and hopes for us as John did; suffering may be a byproduct but it is never the means to an end nor is it ever the goal. So, we look for the helpers.

I am very clear that I can't do what I do without a therapist and a spiritual director, without medication and all the different villages from different parts of my life that have loved me and are loving me into who I am.

Even with all that support, I still struggle, and sometimes those hard moments can overshadow the good things, the great things. Then I remind myself that the spiritual journey is a journey. As long as I stay on this path, eventually the bad things will look and feel different against a different backdrop. AND it takes faith, discipline, and hope to stay on this path. Thankfully when I'm lacking in any of that, I can look around me.

Therefore, in addition to looking for the helpers, look for those who are proclaiming the good news in word and in deed. These saints are the people we want to be with and learn from. These are the people of faith who are walking the Middle Way, people who don't see holding these tensions as holding two ends of a rope that can snap at any second but as forces pushing against each other that will give rise to a new thing.

They wrestle and they struggle and they doubt, and they too are imperfect. AND at the end of the day, they strive to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all

circumstances. This may not happen 100% of the time, but that is their focus, their intention. Their spiritual discipline doesn't lock them in; it encourages them to keep moving closer and closer to the will of God in Christ Jesus for them.

Everything requires tuning and maintenance, from the physical buildings of our church to our mission and vision to our physical and spiritual health. Traditions are a helpful foundation, and it's important to test for cracks, to step back and see if the building is leaning or sinking, to examine where there is need for repair. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything."

Though we find comfort in the repetition of old songs and old stories, in doing what we've always done, we dance on the tension between "do not despise the words of the prophets" and "test everything." We shouldn't automatically throw out traditions and distrust institutions AND we shouldn't accept and preserve what we've been handed without question.

This week I saw a clip from the Tonight Show. They asked Miley Cyrus to sing "Santa, Baby," an old Christmas classic.ⁱⁱ As they're about to go on stage, she asks the host, Jimmy Fallon, if he's read the lyrics.

"Slip a sable under the tree... do you know what a sable is?"

"A sword?"

"No, it's fur, and I'm vegan!"

Since they're in a rush to get on stage, Jimmy Fallon tells her "Do it however makes you comfortable."ⁱⁱⁱ

She then performs a version in which she declares "I can buy my own d--- stuff" and "Listen, Santa, to what I say: A girl's best friend is equal pay. So, stop interrupting me when I talk, and don't text me pictures of your..." and her words are interrupted by a ringing cell phone.

A person can make the argument that the song is harmless. A person can criticize those who take issue with the lyrics for taking things way too seriously.

AND a person can make the argument that this song reflects what some would consider outdated gender roles and an old-fashioned model for a relationship. A person can point out it is time to stop perpetuating this kind of relationship dynamic.

Likewise in church, these last couple of years I've seen an increase in Facebook posts declaring that Mary did know, because the Archangel Gabriel told her so. I've seen people amplify the voices of the women at the manger and at the tomb. These questions are asked out of love, out of concern for the voices that have gone unheard. These questions are meant to make more visible those whose witnesses have largely gone unnoticed.

And the language we use matters. I love the version of the Magnificat we prayed today, which is from *Enriching Our Worship*. It speaks directly to God, saying "you" Instead of

reinforcing the constant rhythm of “he.” And it doesn't, it isn't meant to, replace the traditional version that we have, but it is meant to expand, to include, this broader vision of who God is and how we speak to God.

As part of “testing everything” we are called to examine the water we swim in. We are invited to expand the circle of people we learn from and whose examples we follow. We are encouraged to see the things we’ve always done with fresh eyes and to listen to the way stories have always been told with new ears.

John speaks about listening to voices crying out in the wilderness? What do we consider “the wilderness”? Perhaps it can refer to deserts AND to nearby neighborhoods we’ve never driven through, to mountains AND to the news sections we avoid because they seem too depressing, too chaotic.

Mary sings about lifting up the lowly. This year I’m thinking about the lowly as the challenges that many people face and still find it hard to talk about.

Challenges such as: Aging and not being able to do what we’ve always done. Caring for aging parents and spouses. Raising children when drugs are so readily available and so fatal. Forming blended families with children. Figuring out what we want to do when we grow up even when we’re well into our adulthood. These struggles have their roots in larger issues and cultural assumptions about what’s “normal” and how things “should be.” Though these challenges are widespread, somehow people who face them are made to feel like they’re alone in seeking solutions, in carrying that weight.

As we reflect on our year as individuals, as households, as a church, let us examine the measuring stick we’re using. Are we seeking to be right or to be right with God and God’s people? When was the last time we really looked at the lyrics we’re singing and dynamics we normalize as we retell treasured stories and histories?

As Paul reminds the Thessalonians, “Do not quench the Spirit.” When something doesn’t sit right with us, may we see curiosity and wonder as a sign of faith. May we see recognition and acknowledgment of devastation as a sign of hope, no matter how far up and down it extends through the generations. After all, we cannot hope for the repairs and reversals that we do not seek.

The God who calls us is faithful; God will do this.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2pTwXaVlkau743Gb6EwkIT?si=bc9790a2939642d5>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.glamour.com/story/miley-cyrus-santa-baby>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2018/12/21/miley-cyrus-santa-baby-lyrics-tonight-show-jimmy-fallon-mark-ronson/2385721002/>