

Sermon for Northbrae, November 29, 2020  
So Many Thousandth Noel  
By Carolyn West

Every Sunday service we put together here at Northbrae is the work of many hands. Scriptures written long ago in faith guide us still. Deb, with her music blesses each of us. Jacqueline's voice raises us up. All of the Worship Assistants and Sacred Storytellers, whether they know it or not, are part of creating a spiritual environment that is open and inclusive, that pays attention to and honors to this congregation past, present, and future. Many have found their voice here. I am sure of this, because I am one. Kathy, and Elizabeth, and each of our guest preachers add their insights and words of inspiration. Not all of the inspiration comes from putting together the service itself—we don't often follow a lectionary or have mandatory prayers to speak—but is the fruit from a seed planted in the week just passed, or last year from our conversations as friends and community.

This service, perhaps more than many others, is a gift from many people. Even before I knew that Greg Ledbetter would be called into grief this week, I had a hunch that this Sunday would be different than what we'd planned. Maybe it's just fitting that for the first Sunday of Advent in this strange, difficult, revealing year, things would not flow exactly how they were scheduled on the early draft of the Bulletin.

We must bow to the demands of our life. Though that may not be the teachings you hear first when you greet organized religion, it is a teaching in all religions. Think of the stories we tell: The Buddhist monk looks past his vow of celibacy and carries a woman across a raging stream. A nursing mother, an elderly man, or even a traveler may be allowed to eat during daylight hours during Ramadan. Jesus healed on the Sabbath day, forgoing the rest called for in the commandments because someone else's need was great.

It is a teaching to honor as great in the Torah (and it is in the Torah) to take care of one another when the need is there. And this may be the among the greatest lessons we have learned in our coronavirus pandemic. Yes, I called it *our* pandemic, because we are the ones who hurt and heal. It is ours, and it is holy to yield to the needs of the day.

It's a difficult time right now. We have had to celebrate what is to many people their favorite holiday of Thanksgiving—giving thanks apart, with only a few loved ones who are living in the same household. A bountiful meal for two seems meager when we think of last year or the year before, when we were with extended family and friends. I think of laughter coming from the kids' table that drifts towards the grownups and makes even grumpy old Uncle Purd smile. This year so many of us swallowed longing with our bird and stuffing. Far too many felt such longing without the luxury of a homecooked meal.

I have heard it said that a pandemic shows a people its own face. What face do our people wear? What do we see this strange year? Who, indeed, are we?

Today we take the first step of Advent, which this year we must celebrate with ever more social distance, and the real fear as the number of coronavirus cases rise across the country and at home will creep ever closer to those we love. The progression of Sundays in Advent name our feelings: Faith Hope Joy and Love. But is that what we feel now? In Advent our feelings are sung out over and over again, and it feels good to sing of hope. But how do we manage the exuberance that the season calls for in a year like this? How do we celebrate birth, when fear surrounds us?

In the liturgical year, Advent is the phase of time in which we are to prepare ourselves for the Birth of Jesus. Most of my life, I have seen it as a month of celebration, of anticipation for the Big Day. Among the Christmas decorations I grew up with was a creche, and I would not be surprised if a majority of us here can picture in their mind the Advent creche of their childhood. It was up to my sister and me to set up the creche, and every year the positions were the same: Jesus in the manger, Mary and Joseph beside him. A couple of shepherds and some sheep. A cow. Three Wisemen with dark complexations. And an angel wearing a banner that said Gloria! Hovered on a tiny nail at the pinnacle of the A-frame barn.

It's premature to place the baby in the manger on the first day of Advent. But isn't it the birth we await? A baby's birth. Isn't the creche simply a symbol to bind us to the story? Every year when we hear the story, we already know the ending. Jesus will be laid in the manger once again.

Delivering that little baby in the manger is not the end of the story at all.

For most of human history, when a woman became pregnant, she knew that there was a good chance that either she or her unborn child would not live through the experience of birth. In the time that Jesus lived, there were other hazards, everywhere. Fall, and cuts that went septic. Childhood diseases and those that pained the aged. Caesar's ever present army. Death was a deeper shade of life, an intimate companion, always with you. Can we feel it? Can we feel the liminal state of Advent?

This part of the story was not taught to me growing up. I grew up with vaccines and penicillin. I grew up assuming that almost every time you were sick you got better. We still have vaccines and penicillin. Despite our fears, it is still the case that almost any time we are sick we get better again. Death sits farther off from us these days, and we modern mortals prefer to ignore the face of death for as long as we can.

Yet death is as much a part of Advent as birth is. Perhaps in the rush of celebration we can lose ourselves to merriment. But Christmas is a celebration of the mortal birth of a mortal man. For most Christians, the day welcomes the birth of the Son of God, miraculously incarnate in a human state, born to heal and teach us. But to be born is to make a pact with dying. We are mortal, a word with its roots in death.

In most of Christianity, there are two big days: Christmas and Easter: the human birth of Jesus and the human death and spiritual appearance of Jesus. In our western, American culture, Christmas is the biggie. But for much of the Christian world, Easter is the most holy of days.

Even with the carols and the lights on our trees this Christmas time, even with the joy of birth, we know that Jesus' life ends, and must end for his message of faith, hope, joy, and love to reach us. We celebrate that birth even knowing that life ends. We celebrate the union of our mortal world with the everlasting spark of the divine, that never dies.

For one of today's readings, I chose a story within the thriving life of Jesus, one that is about his work in the world. It is a short passage from the Gospel of Mark, The Healing of Bartimaeus. In this section of the Gospel, not to mention the life of Jesus, the healing of Bartimaeus is really just one of many healings. Yet it's brevity is filled to the brim with meaning, and a good many sermons are written on these seven verses. But there are three things I want to bring into sharper focus today: the cloak, the conversation, and the continuation.

The old blind beggar is covered in a cloak, a darkness, that is as much a symbol as it is a garment. When Jesus hears him and sends his people to bring him forward, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak—such a dramatic flourish. What does it mean? Let's say the cloak the story's objective correlative. If you remember high school literature class, the objective correlative is something ordinary in a story that carries an extraordinary amount of meaning. If Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, he throws off his old life, his darkness, the fear of his mortality, his ability to hide, even from himself.

The conversation between Bartimaeus and Jesus is fairly simple, if you don't count the ruckus. And it follows a pattern that occurs in almost every one of Jesus' healings. He asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus is direct: "My teacher, let me see again." To which Jesus credits Bartimaeus' faith for his healing, "Your faith has made you well," Jesus tells him. Then with Bartimaeus well again, the whole party continue on the way. On The Way.

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, our focus is faith. What would it take for us, in this season growing cold, to throw off our cloaks? How might we walk along The Way as well?

Thich Nhat Hanh gives us a practice of subtle walking, of measured and treasured walking. It is a practice that seems to me appropriate for this era in our history, and this shortened span of festivities. Even those of us who cannot walk for miles can walk in our imaginations. We can imagine the link we have to those mortal ancestors and progeny who are now only stories. Only stories but ones that shape us anyway, are part of us and we of them. We can imagine walking with them, beside them.

Thich Nhat Hahn gives us the gift of healing. Our actions, our mindful, loving imaginations can heal the wounds of those who gave us the gift of life. Our walking and imagining now of those people yet to come is a prayer. A prayer in the dark of the year. A prayer in this dark year. Our walking: Let it be a part of our Thanksgiving; let it be The Way we are in the world.

It is in the finite middle where we have our chance to live, hope, and heal. Let our faith in the living heart of the divine be the way we welcome every birth, every day. Let it be the prayerful way we walk, the way we give to others. Let it be the way we welcome hardship as well as merriment. Let it be the way we face even death, knowing that life is full, and the Divine shines through.

## **SCRIPTURE**

### **Mark 10: 46-52 (Petersen translation)**

<sup>46</sup>They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. <sup>47</sup>When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” <sup>48</sup>Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” <sup>49</sup>Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” <sup>50</sup>So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. <sup>51</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, [let](#) let me see again.” <sup>52</sup>Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

### **From Thich Nhat Hanh**

#### **Walking for our Ancestors and Future Generations**

All our ancestors and all future generations are present in us all the time. Happiness is not an individual matter. As long as the ancestors in us are still suffering, we can't be happy and we will transmit that suffering to our children and their children. When we walk, we can walk for our ancestors and future generations. Maybe they had to walk with sorrow; perhaps they were forced to march or migrate. When we walk freely, we are walking for them. If we can take one step freely and happily, touching the Earth mindfully, then we can take one hundred steps like that. We do it for ourselves and for all previous and future generations. We all arrive at the same time and find peace and happiness together.

(From *How to Walk*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press c 2015)