

Advent 1
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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The Advent Desire

We all have deep yearnings of which we are often quite unaware. The Tsachi people with whom my parents worked and ministered for almost 40 years had a very strict social distancing program in place when my parents arrived. Two women could sit comfortably on their palm-frond mats and chat away happily, 10 feet from one another and facing the other way. If you met someone with whom you had no reason to speak on the trail through the jungle, you slipped off the trail 20 ft. or so and waited for them to pass without greetings of any kind. If you had a disagreement with someone you just distanced yourselves until people forgot about it, or you went to a party and drank enough "mala" to get tipsy, and then, with your normal inhibitions inhibited, you could mention the offense. Catharsis was achieved through naming the offense more than negotiating anything, and the men never sang unless they were drunk, and the women only sang dirges at funerals. COVID-19 would never have had a chance!

When contact from outside was made with the Waorani of eastern Ecuador, the tribe quickly made a name for itself as violent and dangerous. Outsiders were often speared to death shortly after meaningful contact was made. The classic example is 5 American missionaries so killed in December of 1955. If you saw the Hollywood movie, End of the Spear you saw a fictionalized version of the events. An anthropologist I know quite well made the first ethnograph on the culture of the Waorani. He found that a full 70% of the men died violently, and it was rare men to know their grandchildren.

Other examples abound. The Motilone of Venezuela had a legend that God had left them because they made God angry, and that someday someone would come and write down God's words on a banana leaf and reconcile them. For one tribe in Papua New Guinea, The highest honor was reserved for those families who groomed a member of a neighboring clan into trusting them, only to turn on him at the high point of a party, and make him the main course at the meal. Treachery was their greatest value. The only relief was through the offering of live infants between the two communities to be raised as one of their own. These "peace children" superseded the value of treachery between the clans as long as they were alive. To violate that was to truly commit the most heinous of crimes.

We are deeply aware of our own cultural failings. We have some of the best institutions of higher learning in the world, one of the strongest economies, widespread cultural influence around the globe, and count ourselves among the few super-powers, but this year has revealed some very serious cracks in our façade. It has been a year of reckoning with the heritage of slavery and the racial tensions it spawned. The election has brought to the forefront just how divided we are as a people. Our score-card on the environment

has some respectable grades, and then some F's. Our foreign policy has made us the pariah in many important places around the world. And how is it that we as a cultural system can give rise to violent internal terrorist movements that draw almost exclusively young white males? We, too, yearn for something, and we can't even agree on what it might be.

Every culture in the world has its glories, its internal consistency, and its fuzzy edges and internal conflicts. No group of human beings would say that their culture was completely, totally satisfying. Everyone holds within their deepest heart of hearts a yearning for something that would make things right.

Sometimes the arrival of the story of Jesus has helped people move toward that inward yearning. With the Tsachi, in the Church it became acceptable to sing without being drunk, to talk when you didn't need to, and (though this is still hard) to settle grievances. They even borrowed the Spanish word for "pardon" because their own way of expressing it was insufficient to describe what they were doing. The Waorani are no longer caught in their cycles of revenge killings. Instead, they are leading eco-tours into the jungle they call home, earning money to maintain their way of life without the violence. The Motilone almost killed Bruce Olesen who eventually translated the Bible into their language and brought a path to reconciliation with God to them. The Papua New Guinea tribe discovered that Jesus was God's Peace Child, and that by his resurrection he is still alive, giving the people a way to overcome their mutual violence. The remedies aren't perfect, but they are a step in another direction, a step toward fulfilling what Augustine of Hippo noted 1500 years ago: *Every human desire is at its core a yearning for God.*

That deep yearning is our starting point for this series of Advent and Christmas sermons on the Divine Community. On this first Sunday of Advent, all our readings anticipate something unseen. In the passage from Sacred History, the prophet looks back to the times when God has been manifestly present to Israel and yearns for those days of glory. At this writing the Exile is largely behind the people of Israel, but they still can't "get settled." The crown is a puppet that has little influence, and the temple really is becoming the center of the life of the people. It's hard to see the Golden Age of King David under these circumstances, and yet their collective memories still yearn for it. There is a deep awareness of the flaws of the present and a yearning for something better. *This is the Advent Desire.*

In the passage from the Apostolic Instruction, Paul reminds the Corinthian church that they have all that they need, in spite of how they might feel. Paul reminds them: they are preparing for the imminent return of Christ. The tension they feel now comes from being caught between the way things are and the way they will be. They are yearning for something better. *This is the Advent Desire.*

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus slips into apocalyptic language. The sun will be darkened and the moon turn to blood. The Son of Man will gather the elect from the corners of the world. Great and terrible will be the day of the Lord! You can't say when it will come, for no one knows, but come it will. Long for it, for it will set things straight.

This is the Advent Desire.

What, exactly, are we yearning for? We are yearning for God, for community with God, which always finds its expression in a yearning for a certain kind of community on earth. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself are one and the same love. We yearn for the Christian vision of what it means to be human. *This is the Advent Desire.*

What does that mean for us today?

Where in your own heart do you yearn for your own full humanity? We have three dogs, one of which is a Jack Russell Terrier. You know where the word "terrier" comes from? It comes from the Latin "terra, meaning earth. These are "earth dogs," that is, diggers. There are places in the back yard where it is OK for her to dig, and others that are not. No matter how many times I give her places to dig that do not destroy flowers and lawn, she has her own ideas of where the best smells are buried.

We start each service with a confession of sin. At its core, it is an admission that our humanness is incomplete, broken or twisted. We don't always do what we should do, and we don't always refrain from that which is not right. We yearn for wholeness. The absolution provided reminds us that the wholeness is at once conferred and in process. God grants us the grace of not holding our offenses against us so that we can work on living more faithfully. We confess because we yearn to be whole in person and in community. *This is the Advent Desire.*

Where in society do you yearn for our collective full humanity? A couple of weeks ago a protest was held in Washington DC of people who supported President Trump in his attempts to reclaim what seems quite clearly to be a lost election. They chanted "Fake News" to the reporters gathered there. Members of some of the better-known White Supremacy groups were there in uniform. As the day progressed, as we know, counter-protesters arrived and a screaming match began. Things got ugly, and by the end of the day a number of people were injured, including two police officers. I respect the right of everyone to make their convictions known, even if I disagree with them, but when it turns violent, we have lost sight of one another's humanity. I yearn for the opportunity to listen to those with whom I disagree, to understand how their story informs them, to stretch the boundaries of my empathy. If I love my neighbor as myself, and this is love of God, then what I yearn for is a collective relationship in which divine love is at the center of the dance. *This is the Advent Desire.*

Where do you yearn for the fullness of creation itself? As we know, one of the up-sides of the COVID lockdowns around the world is that the human carbon footprint was reduced enormously overnight. Pictures from space showed greatly reduced pollution of air and water and light. The nights were darker with more stars to see, and the days were brighter and healthier to be outdoors. It set up in me a funny sort of tension. I loved the results, but at what a price! That tension is perhaps the tension of an industrial global society. If, as the enlightenment taught us, creation is a commodity we can exploit it without reserve. However, when it stops, a deeply desirable health returns, reminding us that it can be sacrament. Can we live in community with the rest of creation, or will we destroy the ground out from under us? *This is the Advent Desire.*

What is your own deep, unspoken desire? Our society is focused on answers, and some answers need immediate action, but the deep desire will not be answered so quickly. Wisdom is shy. She does not present herself immediately. Compassion at its best moves slowly. So, embrace the desire. Hold it to your bosom and do not let it go. Resist the temptation to try to satisfy it too quickly. Sit with it, befriend it, and love it. The mere presence of the Advent Desire is enough at this time. The cry itself is sufficient.

Meditation questions:

What is your deep desire for yourself?

What is your deep desire for society?

What is your deep desire for the created order?

How do you live in the tension of the desire?