

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-18 Advent 2B; 12.10.23; G. Miles Smith+

Now that all the Thanksgiving turkey dinner leftovers and family gatherings are long gone, we do now find ourselves, of course, in anticipation of another glad holiday. Christmas music can be heard here and there. Your Christmas tree may already be up. And there are more and more outdoor Christmas lights shining in the night.

If there are any kids in your household, or in your larger world, then they may be starting to buzz with anticipation. And the grownups here can remember too what it was like, when we were young, waiting for Christmas--yes? Oh, for me, my young waiting was full of so much longing, not only for presents, but for *the whole enchanted experience of Christmas...which was also inseparable from the enchanted experience of waiting for Christmas.*

So, I want to ask you today: *What are you waiting for now?* As grownups who have long been responsible for our family Christmas holiday preparations, and all that involves...*what are you waiting for now?* Can you still find your way to an enchanted Christmas...and the enchanted experience of waiting for Christmas? As grownups who, at least, may *want* to love Christmas again, it really becomes important that we have some *clarity*...about *what we are waiting for*...and to be able to find our own words...to at least say it to ourselves. |

I ran across two things this past week that I believe are quite compelling and insightful and which may help us. The first is a quote from the Roman Catholic theologian of the last century, Karl Rahner, who said: “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic’—someone who has ‘experienced something’—or will cease to be anything at all.” This can mean many things but within our context today, I take this to mean that *we should not so readily dismiss our past or present experiences of enchantment at Christmas, or any other time.* That, as adults, there really is a spiritual journey open to us, that is crucial.

And then, secondly, low and behold, I ran across the publication of a new Pew Research study that has been released--the first of its kind--specifically studying the *spirituality* of Americans. There has been a lot of research conducted that has focused on *religious beliefs and practices*—and, as you may have heard, those studies have noted *significant declines* in: religious attendance, the willingness to self-identify as Christian (or any other religion), and decline in belief in God. But what this new Pew Research study, called “Spirituality Among Americans,” indicates is that there nevertheless remains a surprisingly strong spiritual sensibility among grownups:

- 83% believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body
- 81% say there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it
- 74% say there are some things that science cannot possibly explain
- 45% say they have had a sudden feeling of connection with something from beyond this world
- 38% say they have had a strong feeling that someone who has passed away was communicating with them from beyond the world.
- 30% say they have personally encountered a spirit of unseen spiritual force.

Overall, 70% of U.S. adults think of themselves as spiritual in some way, or say spirituality is very important to their lives (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans/>). So, it would seem that people actually are not as “secular” as it has come to be assumed. Instead, it would seem to be a matter that more people don’t know what to do with *religious institutions* and *whether religious institutions are actually capable of helping to guide people in the spiritual journey that is already implicit in their lives*, but rather shapeless and wordless and lacking focus.

And so, I would say that Advent and Christmas enchantment is not only for children—but *it is an invitation to us to become the mystics that we already implicitly are...and to go deeper as grownups...into the world of the spirit...which indeed really is.* Maybe that is what we are really waiting for in these holidays without quite realizing it?

In our Christian tradition, this spiritual reality is actually all there--right there at the center of all the Christmas trees, lights, and songs. **We tell the story of the descent of the Son of God into the world, passing through the heavenly realms amid the songs of angels—God making God’s home among us in Jesus Christ...and clearing a path for us back to God that still remains just as open to us today as it was 2000**

years ago. The spirit world and eternity are still ever so close to everything timebound and earthly—it has never ceased. That is the enchantment that still lingers in the background of all we love about Christmas. That is why so many people, even in this age, still experience spiritual realities that they cannot easily find the words for.

And when we do, we are hardly being naïve. So a little aside, here at this point: I love science. There is so much innovative and insightful human work that is expanding our knowledge of the world and which can often be helpful. Friday we had the groundbreaking at Fontaine Research Park for the Paul and Diane Manning Institute of Biotechnology. Through the Manning's incredible generosity of \$100 million dollars, a first order, world-class, research facility is going to be built. And it is important to know that their vision for this, which captivated others, was first inspired from their desire to find gene therapies to cure children of rare genetic disorders and so many other genetic disorders which linger on untouched. When science and technology is wedded to compassion and caring like that then it is an actual extension of the spirit world...and of the mercy and love of God as we know it in Jesus Christ.

And yet, having said that truth, science and technology and all our other intellectual pursuits also have their limits, which the humble among them realize, and others ignore at our own peril. Human intelligence can tell us how long we may likely live, how long a civilization may last, how much longer our ecosphere may be able to sustain damage, how long our sun will exist before it burns out (and therefore how long our earth can bear life), and how long the universe as we so far know it may last until it either disperses into absolute darkness or contracts into a ball of fire. We can see far in this way—and it is sobering to say the least. And there is very little, in the midst of all that knowledge of so many kinds of endings, that can help us to answer the question: “So, what’s the point?”

But we can also see far in another way--that is just as real--and that vision is inaccessible to science and technology. And ironically, it is the spiritual reality which remains the key--for why it remains crucially important for us to still try to care about everyone and everything along the way. *Because, the end is not the end.*

And this brings me to my last thoughts: **Advent and Christmas not only invite us into the spiritual enchantment of eternity within time, and an open pathway to God now, and especially in this season...but it also awaits the end of worlds, the end of all things, and the end of time, where, shockingly, and unexpectedly...nothing earthly and timebound...not a single person...not a single animal soul...not a single tree...not any earthly light or celestial star...is lost...but held safe by God...set free from every bondage to decay...and every evil...transformed...and made whole and new again...a new heavens and a new earth...a second coming of Christ...and the last and the ultimate Christmas.**

My dear friends—

Dare to be spiritual...and love the unseen worlds of God.

Dare to be merciful...and love all and everything in the seen world.

Dare to seek God...in and out of church...and find again...what you have been waiting for.