

December 1, 2019  
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Title, "Changing the Rhythm"  
Text: Luke 17:20-212



My first years in Nebraska, annual conference was always held in Lincoln. Methodist clergy and lay delegates came from across the state to the Cornhusker conference center across the street and worshipped right here at Saint Paul. On my first such long annual conference week, I was introduced to Lincoln, Saint Paul, and the Haymarket. That's when I found Ten Thousand Villages, fair-trade store with wares from all over the world. It was great fun. I admired the art and then the books. I looked at the earrings and beads. I looked at the fabrics and read about the places where they were made. I came upon a display of world instruments. I jingled a bell and rang a chime. I tapped on a drum and tilted a rain stick. I tapped on the drum again. I wandered over to look at a basket and I wandered back to tap on the drum again. I sniffed all the candles and went back to tap on the drum again. It seemed that no matter what other shinny object caught my eye, what other rich fabric I reached out to touch, there was something about my fingers lightly tapping on this drum that called me back again and again. Pretty soon, it became apparent my new friend and I had connected. Like a lost puppy looking for a new home, what could I say, I had to keep it; it followed me home. They say your drum picks you. Thus began my quest to learn more about drumming.

One of the first things I learned is all of us have a beat. Our heart beats, our blood pulses, our respiration brings rhythm to into our lungs and all these rhythms tie together to give us our bodies its rhythms. Our bodies also follow the rhythm of the seasons. Our bodies follow the rhythm of length of days. In other words, amount of sunlight we get varies with seasons and that can affect our moods, our sleep. Changing of the time - even an hour in the spring and fall - can take weeks or months for some bodies to adjust. Our bodies flow with the season of the moon. Season are woven into bodies as well as culture.

Today we are changing the season of the church. Advent is the church season immediately preceding Christmas. Often times, churches exist with the mantra, "we've always done it this way" whatever "it" is. Advent is not one of those times. We don't observe it 'just like we've always done it before.' In the early church, Advent was observed in much the same attitude as Lent ( the season right before Easter) with fasting and abstinence. Advent was a somber time of preparation for the advent of - the coming of - the Feast of Christmas, an annual remembrance of Jesus' birth. Before a great celebration in the church, such as Easter or Christmas, the seasons were for spiritual preparations, seasons of soul searching, examinations of heart. Christians prepared themselves for the celebration of Christ' birth on Christmas the same as they prepared themselves for his rebirth on Easter

with dedication to prayer and study, fasting and almsgiving, repentance, ashes and sackcloth. None of this sounds anything like our Decembers today.

Increasingly the pre-Christmas season is filled with shopping. The heavy stack of sales ads in Thursday's newspaper and the pileup in my email inbox from every company I have purchased from this year and the popup ads on google and the dancing elves on tv, beckoned us to rise at 4 a.m. last Friday to officially usher in the season of shopping extravaganza. I doubt too many churches had to open their doors to masses of people waiting in line eager to bust in and begin their advent spiritual practices at 4 a.m. Friday.

Rather than a month of prayer, fasting and giving something up, December equates to shopping. We shop for presents; we shop for decorations; we shop for food. We shop for stuff we want and stuff we need and stuff we don't if it's on sale. We shop till we drop. Then we get up and hurry to one party after another, two plays squeezed between three concerts, four batches of cookies, and five golden hams! We haul out the holly, string up the lights, deck the halls, find the right outfit - with enough holiday sparkle to be festive, but not too much to be gaudy, clean the house, host the gatherings, and bake till we're toast! And we do it all – in the name of remembering a child born 2,000 years ago in the region of Judea. Ah, but we know all that racing around town, stressing out, and bargain catching is not about that child's birth at all.

The child whose arrival we are remembering grew in wisdom. One day the religious leaders asked Jesus when the reign of God would come. Jesus replied, "The reign of God doesn't come in a visible way. You can't say, 'See, here it is!' or 'There it is!' No—look: the reign of God is already in your midst." The reign of God is not about running here and there in a frantic shopping frenzy. Translated more accurately perhaps the verse reads, "the reign of God is within you." In that passage Jesus went on to say, "those who find their life will lose it, those who lose their life will find it." Or translated differently, "those who grasp and clutch at self according to the way of the world will lose themselves- they will find themselves lost. Those who let go of the self as the world would define you– those who follow as I've done- will find yourself again."

Our faith story paints for us an image that we come from God and when we are very young, we still remember. But in the process of 'growing up', we learn about this world and increasingly forget of the one from whom we came and in whom we live. We develop our self-consciousness, our separate selves. Our identities are shaped by the world in which we live and the world of the child is left behind. Is that what Jesus spoke of when he said, "until you become as these little children, will not know the kingdom of God" ? Is the way and the truth and the life he proclaimed, the way to recover our true self, the path to beginning to live our lives from the inside out rather than from the outside in? Is that what he meant when he said, " Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will find it? Those who try and grasp and clutch at self ( as the world teaches us to do) will lose their self. will be consumed with the worries of the world, will be lost in the madness of the frantic rush to get more ) Is that the frenzied, clanging chaos of our days when our bodies

are fatigued, and our souls are left searching - remembering – barely, but remembering somewhere deep inside – that this isn't IT.

We know deep inside that all this rushing around – looking for the perfect whatever - hurrying up to get and do and see and be ready to celebrate the birth of Christ - is not about to get us a new birth at all. Those who let go – who die to the false self that the world would have us be - will follow me – and find themselves.

We are invited to begin this season of preparation this year by changing the rhythm. We are invited to notice the pulse of our heartbeat, the rhythm of our life. We are invited to hear the drumming of our heartsong and to follow it to the silent space within. That holy space, where the kingdom of God reigns, where our true selves are known and loved, where we receive the true gifts that can't fit in a box under a tree. The gifts of Hope that penetrates despair, Joy that rises even out of anguish and Peace that refreshes our anxious spirits are given by God to those who stop to receive.

May this be a season, we connect to the rhythm of life within and hear the cosmic pulse of divine and experience the kingdom of God birthing through us in our own heart beat, in the world.