
What Do You Want for Christmas?

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Third Sunday of Advent – Year A**

“What do you want for Christmas?” Have you asked, or been asked, that question yet? I have! As much as I want to step out of the commercial Christmas scene, I’m quite preoccupied these days with what to get people, especially my teenage and young-adult children, whose wants grow more mysterious to me every year. And as I’ve been casting about for ideas, I’ve come up with a few things I want for myself, too. Funny how that works!

The next thing you know, what started as a fun activity (that is, thinking about people I love and how I might give them joy) has become a daunting list of to-do’s and must-have’s and must-get-just-right’s.

Of course, we all know this isn’t what Advent’s about! But there *is* something to it. There is something real buried beneath all the wish-lists and commercials and holiday decorations. And I believe it’s this: Advent is a season of longing. Many of us want presents, of course, and good food. But we also long for family and friends and home and warmth and beauty. This is a season when we are so assured of Christ’s coming that we have the courage to wake up to our hopes and hungers and deepest desires.

Our consumer culture feeds these hungers in less than healthy ways, and promises that we can satisfy them, ourselves, if we just buy or do or plan the right things. So we try to fill ourselves this time of the year and spend more than we have: more money, more time, more energy.

It’s no wonder that Christian tradition warns us to be suspicious of our wanting and desiring. After all, wasn’t it Adam and Eve’s longing that got them—and all of us—into trouble in the Garden of Eden? At least, that’s how the story’s often interpreted, unfortunately, if you ask me. But that’s another sermon!

For today: nonetheless, longing is also at the very center of Advent and many of its readings. This season and its promises speak to, and draw out, our real hungers. We hunger for peace, joy, justice, light, love, transcendence. God. With. Us.

Take our reading from Isaiah. It’s an oracle of consolation for a people living in exile. Under the dominion of a foreign power. In a hot, dry, thirsty desert. “The Lord is coming,” Isaiah proclaims, “to save you and set things right. The desert will rejoice and blossom, and the thirsty ground will become streams of water! The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap like deer, and the speechless will sing for joy. And there will be a holy highway for God’s people, which will return your people to joy and to their God, whose glory will be revealed.”

Did all the exiled Israelites live to see this vision fully realized? Will we? I doubt it, at least not in all of its fullness, though we catch glimpses of it all the time. Jesus says as much, in our Gospel today. But still, the vision is real, and it matters. It names the longings of an exiled people and calls them to hope, and to prepare for the Messiah’s coming, and to live even now in the world they want, with God as their true king and judge and redeemer.

Likewise, the vision, and all our visions from God of what can be: they are real, and they matter. They shape our longing and guide our living. They embolden us to dream, and teach us what to long for, helping us distinguish superficial, selfish wants from Christian hope.

In this way, God guides us through our longings, our most honest and most vulnerable longings. Artist Jan Richardson suggests that our deepest hungers may actually be maps--spiritual maps--, by which God leads us back to our deepest selves [\[1\]](#) and reminds us who we are, and who we are called to be.

Through our longings, God also leads us out: out beyond comfort and complacency and despair, which can numb or paralyze us, and out to meet the longings of the world. This is what Richardson calls “the paradox of longing”: “that following our true longings leads us ultimately beyond ourselves; that pursuing the desires of our hearts and souls leads us beyond superficial impulses, beyond grasping, beyond fear of what will happen if we follow our yearnings.”^[ii]

Through our yearnings, God leads us back to God. We keep longing and expecting and waiting for God, and we follow that longing to the place where only God can meet it.

That’s the good news, my friends: God does meet us in our longing. That’s the story of Christmas, too! As the beloved hymn goes, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight,” and will be met in Christ again and again. That’s the story of Holy Communion, too: we come forward, awake to the hungers and longings of our spirit, and are met, and fed and filled, by Christ.

So, let us reclaim that ever-present question, “What do you want for Christmas?”, and listen for the true, Christ-shaped longing beneath it. And let us follow that longing home. To our true selves. To our true calling. To our true God, who is waiting and longing for us, too.

[i] Jan Richardson, *In the Sanctuary of Women: A Companion for Reflection and Prayer* (Upper Room Books, 2010).

[ii] Richardson, 33.