

Advent 3B A Pandemic tapestry: Immanence and Constancy

–The Rev. Canon Nancy Ford, Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria BC

“A thin place” was understood by the Celtic Church as a place where heaven and earth touch. George Macleod, founder of the Iona community described the beloved island as “a thin place where only tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual.” I suspect many of us can recall times when the presence of the Divine has been palpable. It may have been fleeting but that unexpected awareness of the sacred, close and undeniable suddenly changes everything. I wonder if in these narrowed down days as we grow closer to the fullness of Advent there is a sense that this Advent is an unexpected “thin” time.

Hints of this may be found in the Advent readings. Today, Isaiah’s powerful prophetic imagery offers the divine promise of deliverance. Included is the acknowledgement of the necessity for healing, for repair, and for comfort. One commentator suggests this is a creation narrative. God will make something new, something beautiful, something hopeful. This Creator God loves justice, hates wrongdoing and will give recompense, that is, give compensation or promise something different, something better, than has been before.

In the same way as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of creation, Isaiah brings us to the next movement in the fashioning of new life. This is set against the backdrop of the chaos of destruction and exile, a backdrop that is all too familiar, and there is hope. The underlying theme is the constancy of God, urging, nurturing, present. This forward motion takes the listener into the gospels and towards the incarnation.

How does the “thin” time of Advent touch you? For myself, alongside the planned reflections, quiet and prayer, I have found that making/creating something tangible rounds out my Advent practice. There are limitations, the results of my knitting are not for public consumption. This year I have returned to weaving. During our last 3 moves I had carefully wrapped up my four-harness table loom only to notice it had not yet been unwrapped when it came time to move again. This last move I did manage to remove the wrappings. The loom is now up and I have been setting the warp for a new project. The warp is the underlying structure on which the woof or weft is woven. The weft determines the companion design to the warp. While dependent on the warp the weft chooses the dominant colours and overall pattern. As I worked with the threads the rhythm became a meditation. The similarities between setting a warp and the constancy of God’s creating were being laid out before me. The thought of God present, as the foundation, as a constant, urging and supporting potential new patterns and flexible as changes are needed has been giving a different shape to Advent. Setting the warp is foundational for strength, flexibility and the creative opportunities of the cloth. The weft is where patterns may be adapted and changed. There, against the constancy of the warp, mistakes can be repaired and tangled threads straightened. It might be said that Forgiveness is the gift of the warp and Acknowledgment of error and willingness to mend and begin again is the gift of the weft.

We can identify the patterns we have woven into our lives, our families and our communities. Some patterns have helped to shape things of great beauty and positive impact. Whereas others have become distorted and filled with broken and discoloured threads. Making the product unusable. I don't want to push this analogy too far, but I would suggest the imagery of warp and weft has some merit. It is comforting to know we can change patterns, repair mistakes, that broken threads can be mended and new patterns found.

God's constancy is the backdrop to Advent's thinness. Isaiah's prophetic declaration that God will bind up the broken-hearted, provide release to the captives, comfort those who mourn, and repair the devastation of many generations provides the endless warp to our stumbling weft.

Over the past months we have seen with unwavering clarity the limitations and brokenness of our social net. It is not new and is the results of the decisions of generations. Our first response has been deep compassion. But people are worn out.

It is a curious state of being because while there is anxiety, exhaustion, frustration and sadness, there is also optimism, desire for change and commitment to generating new possibilities. Part of this is the paradox of living and working in this uncharted time. I have heard what might be termed hopeless optimism among those who work with the most vulnerable in our communities. They continue to map out new patterns of support but are often unsure if the timelines will work, that frontline workers would be available, and if the projects would be effective.

For example, we know many people have been housed over the last few months with comparatively few problems. But now it is winter. As of a few days ago, it was reported that there are now 172 people living/sheltering under canvas in Beacon Hill Park and the North park neighborhood. Due to Covid restrictions There are no cold weather/emergency shelter beds available. One outreach worker shared the impact of watching people's health deteriorate in these conditions, particularly the seniors. But another spoke of a prototype shelter. It is a 64 sq. foot fire resistant hut. It would be very basic, warm, lockable and inexpensive to create. The hope was that they could be produced quickly. Two agencies offered to have a grouping of the huts on their properties and to be responsible for managing them. Will huts be built? Will there be enough of them? Will there be enough support? That remains to be seen.

In this thin time of Advent might this one broken thread be repaired? Could this be but one small part of a new creation? It is not only creativity that is needed but a willingness to be co-workers in whatever God's new pattern might be. This requires that all who seek a new pattern need to relinquish the scissors of privilege and the sharp edges of frustration and anger which have been used to discolour, fray and cut the threads of possibility.

Come, let us bring the Good news to the oppressed, solace to the broken hearted, liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners and comfort to all those who mourn. Let us rise up from the devastations of generations. God is creating something new, here and now! Amen