

Sunday, November 27, 2016 - All Things New: Show Up

Psalm 25:1-10

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

Is anyone bracing themselves for the season ahead? Do you ever get the sense that you just want to get through it and survive?

If you type in “how to survive the holidays” into Google, you’ll get hundreds of articles and videos with lots of advice on how to get through this time of year. Everything from avoid the mall and eat chocolate to charge it, find God and eat more chocolate.

Many face difficult family dynamics during the holiday season and we want to avoid it for painful reasons. For those of us who’ve lost someone we love, this season can seem unbearable. We might worry about the debt, extra food, travel and gift giving rituals coming our way.

All this together can lead to a season we really want to “just get through.”

I’ve been there. Still today I struggle with how to give gifts that mean something, instead of the latest \$20 trend from the shelf. I struggle with subtly teaching my kids they need more toys to be happy. I wonder about the clutter, trash, the clothes we don’t need, the new tech toys that entertain for a while but lead to further disconnection from real people in real time. Sometimes I’m tempted to just get through the holidays.



But this holiday season is not something to just get through. It gives us a choice. **Advent is a either a race to run or a space to enter.**

You get to choose this year. Every day actually. Is this season a race to run or a space to enter?

For those of you new to faith, let’s define this season before Christmas. We call it Advent. Advent means “coming” or “visit” and it begins four

Sundays before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. During Advent, we prepare for, and

anticipate, the coming of Christ. We remember the longing of Jews for a Messiah and our own longing for, and need of, forgiveness, salvation and a new beginning (www.umc.org).

Can I tell you a true story that we don't talk about much in our culture?

The deepest part of who we are **craves being made new**. Our soul knows it is God who made us. And only God can show us who we really are. Which leads us to wholeness and freedom.

So what actually makes us new? It's not the decorations, gifts, food, parties, debt and shopping. **Some of it might make us feel good**. But it doesn't make us **new**. The posture of our heart prepares us to become new. And if our heart is stressed, exhausted and guarded, we can't receive anything new.

The posture of my heart has been troubled lately. I want to support the leaders of our country. And yet, my heart struggles as I read the Gospels that remind me Jesus calls us to welcome the immigrant, lift up the poor and walk with the widows. The Gospels remind us that all are equal in the sight of God.

And every day I have a choice. I can hide out in my guarded heart and only listen and talk with those who see the world the way I do. Or I can slowly venture out into the open and hear the stories of those with real pain who see the world from a different vantage point. It's not easy. But we need all the hearts we can get that are trying to be open and willing to hear and learn something new. This is how we heal. This is how we keep listening and responding in ways that are true to the Jesus we love and follow. This is how we'll know when it's time to speak up and name an injustice we might see.

In August 2015, we spent four weeks developing what's called a contemplative posture in the world. Show up, pay attention, cooperate with God and release the outcome. It's been about a year and a half. It's time to return to that posture but now in light of Advent.

If Advent is either a race to run or a space to enter, how we decide to show up during Advent makes all the difference for how we receive the gift of Christ at Christmas.

I remember years where I was just getting through the holiday rush and I'd get to Christmas Eve and find myself holding a brightly lit candle in the midst of a full room of people and only then did I realize the joy of Christmas. That we were celebrating a God who loved us enough to be with us in a way we'd understand. Secretly, I thought Christmas was all about how many warm fuzzy feelings I could manufacture.

More and more, I long to show up to the Advent season **now**. At the beginning of the season. To stay grounded and focused on the purpose of this season long before all the gifts are wrapped, the food is planned and the lights are hung. I want to prepare my heart **now** for the gift of Christmas. I want to put myself in a posture of receiving Jesus in a new place in my life.

Our Biblical narrative today centers us as we begin Advent.

I offer my life to you, Lord. - Psalm 25:1

This is the first Sunday of the Christian year. What a wonderful way to begin a new year. We offer our lives to you, Lord. Over and over and over and over and over.

We offer our pride, our frustration, our lack of vision, our anger, our family, our church, our dreams, our plans for the holidays, all of who we are.

When we don't know what else to do, we offer ourselves to God. This is a Christmas posture. When our plans and agendas and dreams fail, we're left to do the thing we should have done first. Offer ourselves to God.

So I have an interesting tendency during vacations that I've noticed the last couple years. I work pretty hard and look forward to times of rest and play. And usually within about 24 hours of vacation beginning, I'm looking for "that feeling" of relaxation, euphoria and joy. And I'm always surprised when it takes about 3-4 days to feel truly relaxed. I usually feel disappointed for a couple days and I tell myself, "Relax! You've only got 4 days left!" Not very relaxing. When I'm wise, I intentionally choose to be present with whatever feelings I have. Knowing and trusting that simply putting myself in vacation mode will provide benefit. And it happens just about every time. I return full of energy for my work. It just never happens quite how I envision.

It's difficult to put yourself in a space when we're looking for a fairly immediate outcome. To keep showing up and showing up and showing up without a direct result can be really discouraging. **But this is what faith does.** And then one day you look around and realize part of you changed. You're not sure when or how. But you **feel new**. The way you see a relationship, a problem, or yourself has shifted.

That's often how God works. And that is a gift available to us during Advent.

Friends, I encourage you to show up to Advent this year. Put yourself in a space to offer your life to God. A heads up, it doesn't usually feel great at first. We feel vulnerable because we often don't feel quite ready to show up. We think we need to do a lot of prep before giving God our lives. **God doesn't need us to feel ready, just willing.**

We show up, regardless of how we feel, where we're at in life or if we feel ready. Mary wasn't ready to become the mother of Jesus. Joseph wasn't ready for the news he received. The world wasn't ready for the kind of king they ended up receiving. They wanted a powerful king on a throne and instead they got a baby born in a barn.

The ways we hope God makes us new this Advent season will spill out into the community around us. So we must ask: **Where is God calling us to show up in our community during Advent?**

One place is with Emberhope. In the early 1920s, the United Methodist Church recognized the need for a residence for homeless and abandoned children. The mission was adopted to provide shelter and care to these children. The church's mission quickly became a reality when a great man in Newton, Kansas left the bulk of his estate to the project, and the City of Newton followed by leading fundraising efforts. These efforts led to the purchase of 20 acres of land for an orphanage, which became the site of the Kansas Methodist Home for Children. The mission was adopted to provide shelter and care to these children. The church's mission quickly became a reality when a great man in Newton, Kansas left the bulk of his estate to the project, and the City of Newton followed by leading fundraising efforts. These efforts led to the purchase of 20 acres of land for an orphanage, which became the site of the Kansas Methodist Home for Children. The organization became Youthville and opened in Washington in 2011. Today Emberhope is a faith-based agency committed to developing innovative programs that inspire change in at-risk youth and families.

We currently host gatherings for foster parent and youth support here at our church. And this Christmas we get the opportunity to provide gifts for 60 kids! Check out the Christmas tree in the hallway and consider picking out a child or two and bring back your gifts by December 11. This is one practical way to offer our lives to Christ and make Advent a space to enter instead of a race to run.

I'd like to try something new this Advent. Would you like to be part of my Advent text list? I'll send one text a day during the weekdays of Advent. It will be a scripture verse or a reflection or question. It's free to receive it. You can sign up by text @mumcadvent to the number 81010 or leave your name and cell number on the insert and a note to add you to the advent text list.

As Advent begins, imagine yourself standing next to a race track with a single open lane waiting for you. You could run it. No one would stop you. And it might make for a meaningful holiday season. Or you could take a deep breath and look over to the right and choose the quiet gravel path that winds through the woods. There are lots of places to pause and rest, to take in the view and appreciate time to explore. There's no rush. **Almost as if the journey to Christmas is the whole point.** I wish you all a sacred and slow Advent season, my friends. Amen.