

ADVENT REFLECTION 1 NOVEMBER 27, 2022

Each week during this Advent season, I want to share with you a poetic piece by the American poet, Ann Weems, and offer a brief reflection on how her words and images might help us to better not only understand this pre-Christmas time, but to also discover new ways of seeing and being ones called by Isaiah to “prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert places the highway of our God.”

This week, Ann gifts us with a piece she called,

IN SEARCH OF OUR KNEELING PLACES

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.

When we are Bethlehem-bound
we experience our own advent in his.

When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars
not hearing angel voices.

We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdom.

This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.

In the midst of shopping sprees
let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.

Through the tinsel
let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.

In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.

This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.

(from *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Ann Weems © 2010 Used by Permission of Westminster John Knox Press)

The first time I saw Bethlehem, I was standing on a low hill near the village where tradition says the shepherds were “watching their flock by night” in which the Jesuits had built a beautiful stone altar which was mosaicked by centuries of candles left burning until the wax seeped across the natural crevasses and holes in the stone to present to us a rainbow altar cloth. We looked down into the valley where this town nestled against the hills, this place whose name in Hebrew means “the place of bread” from which came the One who said, “I am the bread of life.” I was filled with such an expectation and was the first on the bus when John yelled, “All aboard.”

Arriving in the village, we entered a massive buspark and all the dreams and visions I had once carried in my heart about this sacred place of Gifting and Birth disappeared in an instant ! Hundreds of tourists spewed out of buses and cars and vans, all heading in a mass of noise down the road into that little town and I am convinced that I saw the walls of the houses shudder at the arrival of more of the same as the last in-wave. As we joined the frenzy, all I saw on each side of the narrow street was shop after shop offering plastic Jesuses, Nativity table cloths (with matching serviettes no less!), glow-in-the-dark creches and in one store, small bottles of genuine breast-milk of Mary (I swear that this absolutely true, as unbelievable as it may seem !). Fortunately, these seemed to attract many of our fellow pilgrims and by the time we neared the Church of the Nativity, we had been reduced to a reasonable number.

Entering the church is an experience because the doorway is very narrow and short in height. Anyone over five foot ten has to stoop to go through the space, thus finding what Ann Weems describes as the “kneeling places”. It wasn’t always so small a way in, but at some point in the continuing crusades between Christians and Muslims, the door was recreated to stop horses from invading the sacred space. Regardless of why, the “narrow gate” is such a symbol of how we should approach this Advent season – on bended knees of thanksgiving, wonder and awe for the undeserved and unexpected birth of Messiah. Once inside, we gravitated through the nave to a large gold star set in the middle of the floor. The centre of the star is empty and by looking down through the void, you can see a cave which tradition tells us is where the Lord of lords and King of kings came among us two thousand years ago. Again, the kneeling becomes the posture to assume in order to see the fullness of the rude shelter.

The act of kneeling is laden with symbolism, both sacred and secular. One kneels before an earthly monarch as a sign of obedience, submission and the honouring of the office he or she holds. When one is knighted, you kneel before the sovereign and pledge your allegiance to both the individual and the cultural norms that person embodies in their role as king or queen.

Sometimes, the act of kneeling is an act of defiance, a way of saying “Not today....not ever. Do with me as you will but you will not pass”. What seems a posture of weakness can become a symbol of power!!!!

In the religious world, to kneel is to physically alter your reality and in Judaism, Islam and Christianity is one of the postures adopted when in the presence of the Divine. To kneel is to acknowledge that the object of your reverence is supreme – your knees are on the ground, your feet are pointed down to encompass the underworld and your hands are usually raised heavenward, thus uniting the pray-er with the totality of creation and, as the psalmist writes in Psalm 95, “Come, let us bow down in worship and kneel before the Lord our Maker, for He is the Lord our God and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.”: As we assemble and gaze upon the creches in our homes and worship spaces in this season, lo we behold the Magi (Wise Men) usually kneeling before the child and offering the symbols of the world – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Ann calls us to begin a journey to Bethlehem where the Lord of lords and King of kings waits for us to enter his birthing-place and accept his gift of new life, new hope, new love. In our Advent time, we are called to find a quiet resting place apart from all the hubbub, chaos and confusion which is such a part of our preparation for this blessed season. We are called to answer Jesus’ question, “Is there place in your heart, in your dwelling-place for me?” Advent is also an invitation to what Mark describes as a “quiet and lonely place” (Mark 1:33) where we can be one with our Lord in a time of reflective peace, to pray, to listen to music, to read the Good Book or some volume of reflection away from the cacophony of life, for Jesus said to his disciples upon their return from their first foray as evangelists, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest “ (Mark 6:31) This is a part of the gifting of Advent – the finding of time and space to just kneel before the Lord, to absorb the enormity of His giving grace and to find that kneeling place in Bethlehem as you hear Him say, “Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble and you will find rest for your souls.

Today, Ann Weems invites us to “come and see” and receive the Bethlehem light. Alleluia!

PONDERINGS:

1. Is there place in my heart, my life for the Lord? How do I show this to myself?
2. Can I try to find a “quiet place” where I can “be still and know the Lord” in the busyness? Am I willing to “let go and let God” for a few minutes a day?
3. What do I promise myself this Advent as a spiritual oasis from the storm of December?