

First Sunday in Advent

The Price of Love

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Appropriately enough, we begin Advent and the new liturgical year with anticipation. Jeremiah cries out in the name of the Lord: "The time is coming when I shall fulfill my promise" Paul exhorts us to strengthen our hearts. But then in the Gospel we have Jesus announcing the fulfillment of that promise, the day of the Lord's coming as a day of fear and tribulation. What's this? God loves us does he not? Why should his coming evoke fear and tribulation?

God's love may be a gift, but accepting that gift still comes at a price--the price of any true love: loss of self to the selfish, loss of control to the controlling, loss of life to all whose lives would be circumscribed by the boundaries of their own skin.

It is the price of love that makes God's love feel like God's wrath when we sin. God's love feels like God's wrath to the extent that we still confuse self-love with self-centeredness; self-worth with self-aggrandizement, self-confidence with self-sufficiency. God's love lifts us up only by drawing us out of ourselves, fulfills us only by pouring us out, saves our lives only by loosening our death-grip on them.

Love takes courage. Opening our hearts exposes them. Its like dropping our firewall. We may still have our anti-virus program running, but opening the email attachment might infect our operating system. Others can hurt as well as heal, abuse as well as affirm. A common response to pain is to resolve never to trust anyone ever again. But what is a life cut off from others? How much good is a laptop offline? I can still write but I cannot communicate.

Love is dear. In both senses. It affects us dearly. It costs us dearly. But ultimately love is life. We are made for each other, again in both senses. We are created to connect and to commune. Our meaning is to be found in what we end up meaning for others. We belong to one another. We find God through our love for one another. And when we do see God, what do we see, but God seeing us--eye to eye, beholding us beholding him beholding us.

To welcome God's love into my life I know I shall need to grow in faith—the faith that enables me to risk letting others in however betrayed I have been by others in the past. To welcome God's love into my life, I know I shall need to keep hope alive especially when all seems hopeless, believing that my Redeemer lives. And finally, to welcome God's love into my life I know that I shall need to grow in love—and not least of all, love of myself, by moving out of my self into the lives of others, into God's own divine life.

The good news is that God embraces us all. God loves us whether we like it or not. The bad news is that there is no escape. We can run but we can't hide. Love leaves us vulnerable to hurt. But without love we hurt even more. Without love we die.

And so is the advent of love into our lives a time of trepidation, or is it to be a time to rejoice? Probably both, for we cannot love by ourselves. We need to feel loved to be able to love. And so perhaps the first step is to not take the love already in our lives for granted. The first step may be to find where love has already taken root and tend those fragile sprouts, or marvel at that towering old sequoia and take rest in its shade.

May our faith take root, may we keep hope alive, and may we open ourselves out into the boundless expanse and bottomless depths of love that is the very heart of our God.