

Second Sunday after Christmas-C

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1:1-18

The text for the sermon comes from the Gospel: "What has come into being in God was life, and the life was the light of all the people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

And this, from the poet T.S. Eliot's long poem, "Little Gidding":

*"With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling*

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."*

When does 'now' begin?

When do I have to stop eating the massive plate of Christmas cookies my sister brought to the house and which I have tried, quite unsuccessfully, to hide from myself?

When do I really have to start my New Year's regimen of abdominal crunches and regular yoga classes so that my bone density doesn't take a hit? When do I have to meet with a Portico representative so that I can begin the scary process of figuring out what my retirement picture currently looks like?

Or—alternatively:

When do I get to spend an hour-and-a-half each day at my desk, just writing?

When do I get to go to a bed-and-breakfast and wake up the next day and sip coffee beneath a mound of covers and read the paper and not put in my contact lenses until noon?

When do I get to re-read my favorite books? When do I get to watch again my favorite movies?

And--

When will God come back to us?

When will God come back?

You see, our lives fall into two neat divisions: what we don't want to happen that we know will happen—or should happen—sooner than we'd prefer and also what we want to happen but never happens soon enough. We don't have much room for the already-at-work wonder of our lives, lost as we are in searching for or avoiding a different kind of now.

I should stop eating the Christmas cookies Jackie gave me. And if I start wearing very baggy sweaters in the coming weeks, you'll know I haven't. And I should make time for the yoga classes and the abdominal crunches because "use it or lose it" is a real thing as we age. I should also meet with the Portico representative because knowledge, as they say, is power, even if it certainly is not income!

And--God should come back to us.

But, wait—we are still in the season of "Emmanuel," aren't we? We are still in the season of "God With Us." So why am I saying that God should come back if God is already here?

Well, you know, where is "here?"

And if God is here now, then when does “now” begin?

It’s all well and good to say that God is *right here*, manifested in each of us. Luther said we are each “little Christs” and in that sense then God is right here this very minute—everywhere you look, in each one of us.

It’s all well and good to say that. And I think it helps us to love each other more if we can see each other as little Christs. But I think we also believe—hope for, long for—a God who transcends the limits of what we can see when we look at each other. I think we cast about with our hearts and our imaginations in search of the God we cannot touch--and we try to touch God, anyway.

And it’s all well and good to say that God is present *now*. But I still think we cast our longings into an eternal union with God that knows no past, nor no future, but only the eternal now. Isn’t that what Job wanted, for those of you who were in the Job Bible study this fall? Job wanted God face-to-face.

We search, we cast about, wondering when the eternal *now* begins and what God’s full presence in our lives might be.

For the time being, we live our lives torn between the now that we wish would happen—sleeping late, re-reading favorite books, time for favorite hobbies--and the now that is happening that we’d be just as pleased if it didn’t—tooth decay, taxes come due, bones shrinking inside the flesh.

For the time being, we live our lives in darkness. But we must remember, we are called to remember that we live in a darkness intermittently suffused with epiphany’s brilliant light.

Though it’s easy to forget, we are still in the Christmas season—even if we’ve eaten all the cookies, stopped watering the tree and maybe even left the Christmas lights in our windows turned off because it seems the season has passed. We are still in the Christmas season, even if the stores are full of hearts and boxes of candy for Valentine’s Day, farther down winter’s road.

We are still in the Christmas season, but it’s easy to forget where we are: still at the manger, still kneeling before the Christ child, still sore from the camel ride, following that westward-leading, still-proceeding star.

We forget that that’s the *now* right now, in our rush to put order back into our lives.

And Epiphany? It’s just around the corner, but it’s not a commercial holiday, so we might tend to forget it. There won’t be any Epiphany sales. Or parties. Or cookies. There is no Epiphany wreath, nothing cultural to remind us that “epiphany” is a Greek word that means not simply “aha!” but “out of” or “by light.” Epiphany is something revealed.

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

I’ll repeat the theme again: we live our lives in darkness, but one intermittently suffused with epiphany’s bright light, a light worth taking the trouble to look for. Because “now” really is sometimes, *now*. And “here” is sometimes really *here*. And most of the time, we want more of that. In our love of more, we overlook the now.

Let me be clear: I don’t think it’s wrong to want more, particularly when it comes to wanting the things of God. I think it’s a sacred attitude to want more of God—because we cannot want more of what we don’t already know about, what we don’t already love. We want more of God precisely because faith has led us to recognize and worship what is divine.

And so we want more love, more God, more light, more epiphany. And that’s good. But longing is also a hard state to live in. Longing for that more-ness is so painful we sometimes end up ignoring altogether the God and godliness *here now*. Longing for more of God can be so painful that it’s sometimes easier to shop till we drop, frenetically organize our day planners—or other people’s day planners--or watch marathon reality TV shows or political debates (seemingly the same thing these days) than it is to realize that what we want is more of is not things, is not time management is not entertainment—but love and light and God.

I think our desires are holy. Our wants are sacred, proof of our faith in God's promise:  
What we *want* is the eternity reality of life with God.

But what we *have*, for now, is life.

You know, I've referenced the poet W. H. Auden long Christmas poem "For the Time Being" a few times this season. It's a long, marvelous meditation on the birth of Christ—and it ends with a succession of voices each describing the process of taking down the tree, burning the greens, getting the kids ready for school again and returning to our offices, offices that seem somehow even more narrow than ever before.

That's because, one voice says, "To those who have seen/The Child, however dimly, however incredulously/The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all."

Trying because we know, in some sense what is to come: Lenten times for our soul, with accompanying emotional famine and fasting; Good Fridays in our hearts when all is bleak and filled with despair; and resurrection that can only be accomplished on the other side of one kind of death or another—illness or loss, estrangement, loneliness.

The Time Being is trying because we know much good is promised to us. And we know much heartache will also come before the fullness of that goodness is ours. But I believe that our hunger for more love, more light, more God is stronger than our fear of what life holds in store for us. And stronger than our fear of death. And that's what sustains us. It is a holy thing to want eternity.

But what we *have*—right now—is our life.

And in this life, we can't look too long into the unfiltered and blazing light of God—that eternal source of *more*--or we will be too blinded to live the lives we are called to lead.

The light that is in the darkness is the light that is best suited for us. It is the light that will illumine our lives without blinding our vision. It is the light we can follow to a destination. It is the light that warms and cheers us. It is the light that lets us know the unfathomable God is somehow--and fathomably--truly with us.

To know God in glimpses and hints and flashes is to know, as St. Paul said, only in part. Knowing in part makes us restless. But the restlessness is good. It's a godly longing and it keeps our hearts and our imaginations always looking ahead.

We love that blazing birth star and we'd like to blaze with it. But it would consume us like so much tinder. And so, the star keeps its distance, it eludes us, keeping always ahead of us on the way. The star eludes us and the star leads us in the darkness on this pathway which only ends when it finds its beginning in God.

T. S. Eliot wrote of the life of faith:

"With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."

Amen.