

**The First Sunday of Advent**  
**December 3, 2017**  
**Rev. Devon Anderson**

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It was the end of May this past spring and I was *so tired*. I had nothing left to give, and was living day-to-day on the fumes of an empty tank. In the span of one week I had: trained the Camp du Nord summer staff up in Ely (part of my volunteer work in the community); worked with the Trinity staff and leadership to finish up preparing for my sabbatical departure; delivered my final sermon; whooped it up with all of you good people at the festive good-bye party; hosted out-of-town family, come for my son's 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation; and packed up a family of four for a one-month European adventure. "Wheels up" was two days after my final Sunday at Trinity. I think I speak for most people when I say: it is very boring to listen to other people talk about how tired they are. So be assured that I was as boring as I was empty.

I could not *wait* for the sabbatical to begin so I could get rid of my emptiness by filling myself back up. To be honest it's because I am extremely uncomfortable with feeling empty inside and will do just about anything to avoid it. My drug of choice: distraction through busy-ness. As so many of you know, I have a big appetite for projects. But I tend to take them on, one after another, until my waking hours are packed to the gills. In the clergy world we call this behavior a "soft addiction." My soft addiction is being busy. And like any addiction, filling my time with projects and commitments deludes me into thinking an overstuffed calendar can somehow fill the places inside me that are bereft or empty -- but it doesn't, really. Instead being busy ultimately lays me more wanting, even more desperate, and working ever harder, to fill the void.

So off I happily skipped into my waiting sabbatical – hoping against hope for five glorious months of fulfillment, literally filling myself with rest and fun, adventure and inquiry, family, friends, bike riding, reading. It didn't happen that way at all. God's a tricky dude, and had something else in mind. For some unexplainable reason, I found myself avoiding the rush to fill back up, and, instead, to my surprise, emptying myself out even further. I spent long, quiet days slowly cleaning the heck out of our house. Bags and bags of old clothes, books, toys, sports gear went to ARC Value Village. I rode my bike for hours upon hours, noticing the waves on the lakes, and the color of the sky. Sometimes I found myself sitting on our screened-in porch just staring into the ether for long periods of time. Normally at family camp in Ely I gulp the plethora of activities – hikes, art projects, group sings -- moving from one activity to the next like a crazed bumblebee. But this summer it was just sitting back, taking it in, listening to night sounds, shooting photos. And yoga – so much yoga, for weeks and weeks I focused daily on measured breathing and contorting my body into those poses until there was nothing left over for the buzzing of "monkey mind" – just empty space opening up inside of me.

Even before I knew what I was doing, I was in the process of emptying out -- so contrary to what I thought I wanted, but so precisely what I needed. In his book, *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue reminds us that we can never "fill our emptiness up with objects, possessions, people, or experiences." We suffer, he claims, from "the Epistemology of Quantity" – a belief that more is always better. "But the more we have," he writes, "the more it deadens us to what is...In the world of the soul, the reality is actually the reverse – there are small, empty places inside of us that can receive the fullest magnificence of God...As the earth is vast and endless and deep – so, too, is the human heart. Part of the magic of perception is that even the tiniest, empty space in our heart can reveal to us a glimpse of God's vast landscape that we have never guessed at all."

What I learned, before I could even put words to it, was that the emptiness in me, and the emptiness in you, can only really be filled by God. No matter how hard we try, the places of emptiness within us cannot be filled with distraction or denial or addictions. That is delusion. And the spiritual life is really about finding a way to keep our empty places empty, to allow ourselves to feel the fear or the grief or the confusion or the boredom that those places in our hearts can cause. Because if we cannot allow ourselves to save space for "not knowing," for mystery, for hope, for listening, for surrender – if we can't save space within us for those things - how can God fill us? How can God do God's work of deep healing and transformation if we've left no room for God to work?

I am acutely aware that this call – of handing our seemingly barren places within us over to God – is extremely challenging and emotional work. Today is the first Sunday in the season of Advent – the season that beckons us to wait and ready ourselves for the coming of Jesus. And what I'm offering this morning is that the work of emptying ourselves out, and then being willing to sit with those empty spaces, is the work of preparation to which we are called.

This morning we are treated, yet again, to a series of scriptures featuring the judgmental "I'm coming to wipe you all out" God. Will it never end? But let's stop for a minute and remember that it's no accident we're reading these verses in Advent, in the season of preparation and readiness. Read through this lens, the scriptures shift from the portraiture of an angry God to a God showing us how to cleanse ourselves so that deep, dark seeds of transformation within us can begin to take root. Across this morning's scriptures we have metaphors about cleansing. We hear about tearing open the heavens and diving down into the small crevices of the earth. We hear about great fire that burns what is not necessary: brushwood and chaff, clearing the way for new growth. We hear about a great darkening – as the sun goes away, the moon refuses to cast her light, and the stars fall from heaven. The imagery reminds me of a piece on MPR last week about new studies that reveal deeper complexities about the importance of sleep. Scientists are finding that sleep is the time when toxins are washed away from our brains. During the complete darkness of sleep our brains literally reboot – letting go of what clutters or muddles, making room for fresh and open pathways. The Gospeler Mark puts a fine point on the metaphors: when the cleanse, or the emptying out, is happening, "when you see these things taking place, you know that God is near, at the very gates."

The value of “empty” is not unique to our Gospels. In fact, if you have eyes to see it, it’s *everywhere*: art, literature, poetry, immersed throughout our Christian history and theology. *Stand still and do not waver from your emptiness*, wrote the 12<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, *for at this time you can turn away, never to turn back again*. Or this from the 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Hafiz (pronounced: Huh-fee-z): *I am a hole in a flute that the Christ’s breath moves through – listen to this music. How did I become all these things, and beyond all things? We are a hole in a flute, a moment in space, that the Christ’s body can move through and sway all forms – in an exquisite dance – as the wind in a forest*.

The necessity of empty places is central, too, to other world religions. Wrote Lao-Tse, (pronounced Lahow-cha) thought to be the philosophical founder of Taoism, *Thirty spokes share the wheel’s hub, It is the center hole that makes it useful. Shape clay into a vessel, It is the space within that makes it useful. Cut doors and windows for a room; It is the holes that make it useful. Therefore profit comes from what is there; Usefulness from what is not there*. Our friend and colleague at Carleton College, Roger Jackson, taught an introduction to Zen Buddhism entitled, simply, “Emptiness.” The offering explored the practice of “Sunyata” (pronounced: Shoon-yah-tah), the Sanskrit word for “emptiness,” whose familiar symbol is an empty circle. I offer these examples because, to me, when what we are taught in the Gospels is reflected in other paths to God, and by artists and poets, it feels like an even greater truth, one that we share with people very different from ourselves because it speaks so directly and relevantly to our human condition.

And so, I invite you to spend some contemplative time this Advent season going inside yourself and taking a look around. Sometimes empty places within us can be better identified as circumstances that make us feel afraid, or sad, or confused, or worried. What would it look like to just survey that emptiness? Not trying to fix it or fill it or ignore it – but just sitting with it, accepting it? What would it look like to hollow that empty space out even further, creating open space around it and trusting God to be with you in that space? If this spiritual enterprise piques your interest, I leave you with an image that might be helpful to hold on to.

The Basilica of San Marco in Venice, Italy is an enormous, opulent, over-the-top monument to Christianity. Built in the first century, its size is sheer enormity – its interior structure based on a Greek cross features soaring domes, marble floors, tapestries, paintings, sculptures, and golden mosaics depicting every scene from the life of Christ on every available surface. Despite the massive size and space inside, ironically there is not enough space for the herds of sweaty tourists from every corner of the globe, and bossy guides shouting into portable microphones. A critical thinker might surmise that this monument to the glory of God does an excellent job shouting over the glory of God – and not, I think, what Jesus had in mind. But there’s one, small exception. In the left transept there sits a small, almost rustic Chapel of St. Peter. In it are no tapestries, no gilded chalices, hardly any people – only a few rows of ancient, creaky wood chairs facing a calm, simple icon. Known as the “Madonna Nicopeia,” the painting of Mary and Jesus was brought to Venice from Constantinople during the 4<sup>th</sup> Crusade.

Legend says that the icon was written on Mary and Joseph's wooden dinner table by the disciple Luke. It's thought that Mary blessed the portrait, and the blessing infused it with power. Venetians believe the icon protects them and their city. Though it's easy to miss amidst the basilica's grand, vaulted display, the icon, and the chapel in which it has lived for centuries, radiates a feeling of quiet power and awe. It's almost as if tucked away in that dark, dingy, empty chapel lives the only space available for the authentic, transformative whisper of the living God to break through. So, if you're interested – you might imagine yourself sitting in that chapel, staring at a plank of wood painted with Jesus, immune to the swirl and glitter “out there.” Imagine sitting there, surrounded only by the needy, starving parts of yourself. Imagine opening those empty places even wider, inviting God in,