

Seeds of Promise

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Third Presbyterian Church
November 29, 2015 – Advent I
Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36**

The Reverend William Young served with distinction first as assistant pastor and then associate pastor at Third Church for some 30 years. Many of you remember his ministry and benefitted from it. Bill died this past year, along with his wife Anne. And I was touched again earlier this month to read their names in our annual All Saints remembrance. Bill was extremely supportive of me in many ways, and I think of him with gratitude in this season.

William and Anne moved twice in recent years, from a house to an apartment then to another apartment. At each of those moves, he called me and asked if I wanted to look at his extensive library to see if there were any books I might like. I jumped at the opportunity, though we laughed the second time when I did say that if I hadn't wanted something in the first move I likely didn't want it in the second.

Among the things I received were several volumes of poetry, including poems appropriate to different seasons in the church year. It should not surprise you to hear that some religious poetry is downright lousy and some is pretty good. Some of the best religious poetry does not seek to be overtly or overly religious, and is all the better for it. In gratitude for William Young's ministry I am endeavoring this Advent season to share a poem a week from one of his volumes and to connect, hopefully without too much contrivance, that poem with this conversation.

A poem, then, by Geoffrey Hill, called "Christmas Trees."

"Bonhoeffer in his skylit cell
bleached by the flares' candescent fall,
pacing out his own citadel,
restores the broken themes of praise,
encourages our borrowed days,
by logic of his sacrifice.
Against wild reasons of the state
his words are quiet but not too quiet.
We hear too late or not too late."

Bonheoffer is Dietrich Bonheoffer, the German theologian and pastor of the 20th century, whose works continue to give shape to the 21st century. Bonheoffer was imprisoned by the Nazis for conspiring to kill Hitler; he was executed just as World War II came to a close.

I am no literary scholar, so I can only surmise why the title of Hill's poem – "Christmas Trees" – does not appear in the text. The broken themes of praise, the quiet, but not too quiet, words of witness against Nazism's totalitarianism.

We drove from Ohio back to Rochester yesterday afternoon and evening and the Christmas radio stations were in full force. Like religious poetry, some Christmas music is downright lousy and some is pretty good. We heard many songs about Christmas trees, including one called, appropriately enough, "O Christmas Tree," sung by Nat King Cole.

I know there are many tree traditions. Some of you might have them up already, taking advantage of the holiday just past. Some of you wouldn't dream of putting them up until closer to the big day. I knew a family who wouldn't put theirs up until December 26 – after all, they said, it was a *Christmas* tree.

I am not one to worry too much about whether in the public sphere it is called a Christmas tree or a holiday tree. It's good to balance a little religious sensitivity and common sense. Christ is in Christmas whether a Starbucks cup says it or not, and a tree, to the poem's point, gives silent witness both to brokenness and hope regardless of the label we attach to it.

Because I was with family in Ohio, I reminisced about our own Christmas tree traditions. We grew up with an artificial tree, with branches of various lengths tipped with various colors of paint to make the sorting easier. We had great fun assembling that tree, like a jigsaw puzzle, and we felt quite accomplished at its completion.

In marriage I transitioned happily to real trees, now purchased annually just outside this door from Troop 31.

It is not Christmas yet. We need these weeks of Advent to prepare and anticipate and wait. This Advent we will sing some new Advent music from our new hymnal, as well as familiar music, including an expanded version of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." It is not Christmas yet, yet trees don't just appear, so I think it's OK to talk about Christmas trees, whether artificial or real, whether put up in late November or later in December.

In this "Year of Sowing" I think about what needs to happen for something actually to be harvested, or, in this case, cut. What and when. What needed to happen for the corn we might have just enjoyed, or the potatoes, or the wheat that ultimately became stuffing, to appear on our Thanksgiving tables? A seed, planted long ago, cultivated, nurtured, mysteriously but not magically, gestating over time until the right time, for us to experience it.

Or that tree. Artificiality aside, what needs to happen for that tree, big or small, to appear in our home, whether you tramp out into the woods to cut it yourself or whether you entrust a young Boy Scout to tie it to your car top with a just learned knot? A seed, planted long ago, cultivated, nurtured, mysteriously but not magically, gestating over time until the right time, for us to experience it.

That is our Advent task, to plant seeds, seeds of faith, to allow those seeds planted with us to be cultivated and nurtured. They will be planted in our hearts. They will be planted in our world. We are, therefore, both garden and gardener, both cultivated and cultivator, both grown and grower.

We will hear words this season like “joy” and “hope” and “peace.” Those cannot be empty words, hollow or idle, like seeds that fall on rocky ground and do not grow.

This will be a season when we also hear words based on fear and discord. We know the litany all too well. Deaths caused by guns at a Planned Parenthood site. Protests in Chicago, just across the street from where I once worked, marking another crying out against another young black man shot to death by police. Fearful and reactive talk of the other and the stranger and the foreigner that belies, I believe both the very essence of our nation and more so the very essence of our faith. Fear of terrorism near and far. Heightened racial tension on many campuses, including locally. Not to mention untold dramas unfolding in each of our lives every day.

We know the litany. How do we plant seeds of joy and hope and peace in this troubled ground and cultivate and nurture them so that something beautiful can grow? That is our Advent task.

The prophet Jeremiah tells us one place to look – to the branch of a tree. A branch of a tree that will grow from David’s line, born to us as a tiny little baby. What we are to remember is that this baby doesn’t just show up, but, rather, this birth is the culmination of many births before him, cultivated and nurtured over generations. And the harvest of this tree will be justice and righteousness, what we need right now more than ever.

Advent also offers us insights into what Jesus’ ministry will look like. The closer we get to Christmas the closer we get to his birth but here we experience him as a full grown man, teaching, witnessing, about his return after his death. The message today it to wake up, be alert, pay attention.

Then he tells a little story involving...yes, a tree. "Look at the fig tree and all the trees," he says. When they grow leaves you know what season it is. We understand that image, do we not, marking our time, marking our seasons, by what the trees look like?

We raked and blew and raked and blew our leaves, only to have the wind return them to the yard, hoping against hope that the timing of our piling would coincide with the timing of the leaf trucks. We know what time it is when the leaves bloom and we know what time it is when the leaves fall. Think about the seeds planted to make all of that extraordinary rhythm and pattern known to us.

Welcome to Advent, needed deeply by each of us and needed deeply by our broken and fearful world. Under the pressures of this busy season and under the weight of the burdens of the world, I hope that our praise can somehow be restored, and that in its restoration, we might offer a healing presence to our culture and world, a gentle, quiet but not too quiet, healing presence.

We look around us and know what time it is. We open our ears to hear the needs and the demands. The seeds have been planted. We pray, in hope, we live, in hope, that we are not too late. Amen.