

“Room to Breathe” – Advent I; Matthew 24:36-44 (November 27, 2016)  
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[Sterling and the other elves were hard at work yesterday.]

“In days to come...” That’s how our Advent began with Atit’s reading this morning. “In days to come...” Advent is about anticipation, so we begin with that phrase, “In days to come...” But what we expect from Advent is often based on how we have experienced Advent in the past. We expect there to be candles, because, well, that’s how we’ve always done it. We expect to sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” because that’s an old Advent standard. We develop these expectations because we have grown to anticipate what’s next based on our experience.

But Advent also asks us to open ourselves; the journey of Advent is a journey of surprise, a pilgrimage of wonder. We recognize we’ve been on this trek before, but we are not the same people we were the last time we moved through this season. Our sometimes-romantic memories of the way things were, may not be as accurate as we believe. Things have changed; the world is somehow different. We have had opportunities to learn, and opportunities to grow. And so, we develop the capacity to learn from the past without living in it.

This is our theme for Advent this year: To learn from the past without living in it. In order to frame that theme, we are using the Advent texts to stop at various sites in the Holy Land as we make our way to the Christ child, who – *we expect* – will be waiting for us in the stable under the star in Bethlehem.

As you heard from Atit’s reflection, our first stop on this journey is Jerusalem. “Every nation shall stream toward it,” writes Isaiah, “Let us ascend God’s mountain... and walk in paths of justice... in days to come.” God, in your mercy, may that be so.

Jerusalem is both foundation and pinnacle; it is the bedrock of faith, and the beacon of hope. It becomes the most wondrous gateway into this season of Advent. Rabbi Abraham Joshua

Heschel writes of the Holy City: “Jerusalem is a prelude, an anticipation of... *days to come.*” Jerusalem “is the city where waiting for God was born,” he writes, “where anticipation of everlasting peace came into being.”

It is not that everlasting peace came into being, but anticipation of that peace. The Advent of that peace – the great potential for a peace that will eventually pass all understanding. Rabbi Nahman said, “*Wherever* I go, I go to Jerusalem.” Jerusalem is an archetype of expectation.

It is a city that forces us to consider future things. It is a city learning from its past, and sometimes stuck in that past.

If you have been there, you can attest that, like most cities, it is a thriving hub of activity. Storefronts, and hostels for backpackers, and the homes of locals all stand on top of one another. This is not the hustle and bustle of Costco the day before Thanksgiving, or Target on Black Friday. The overriding nature of its religious significance coupled with its long and complicated history impart a frenetic collision of space that is residential, sacred, and market.

Monuments and chapels are built above older monuments and chapels; some apartments have been occupied by the same families for generations upon generations. There are places in the city where archaeologists have peeled back roads and courtyards to show the incredible depth of stratigraphy beneath. In front of the Chapel of St. Anne (the mother of Mary), the courtyard ends abruptly. You can look straight down into an open wound in the earth, and see the Pool of Bethesda three full stories below, now exposed after two thousand years of rubble and refuse has been removed. This is the pool where Jesus is believed to encounter those expectantly awaiting their opportunity to climb into the healing waters. Maybe some part of us yearns to join them there with the anticipation and hope we have for our own healing.

To walk the streets of old Jerusalem is to walk shaded by the buildings erected up against each other – to walk shoulder to shoulder with tourists, residents, holy people, religious leaders, and military officers; to be bumped and jostled and tossed by the ebb and flow of an ocean of people. Secular, religious; profane, sacred; celestial and mundane. These are all present within the gates.

In out-of-the-way corners there are children kicking soccer balls, and elderly people sipping tea; in the street there are pilgrims carrying wooden crosses up the Via Delarosa, and security guards with guns, and peddlers with carts bearing the load of thousands of post cards.

It is humanity. It is variety. It is stunning.

It is claustrophobic.

There is hardly room to breathe.

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And in Advent, that's what we learn that we need. We need room to breathe.

In days to come, unsure of what the future holds, but holding fast to expectation, we will certainly need some room to breathe.

Do you ever feel like you need a little breathing room?

So, this morning, we step outside of the Holy City, and ascend the Mount of Olives, where we can look back over Jerusalem filled with our own expectation of what Jesus might say. This is probably where he explained this apocalyptic vision, which he described to his disciples that Patricia read to us from the Gospel of Matthew this morning. The city looks peaceful from the perch on the Mount; we retreat there to have room to breathe, and yet the panorama is itself breathtaking.

As we consider Jesus offering his warning, we read his sobering words of a stark future – something, as I mentioned, apocalyptic in nature.

But perhaps the words written in this passage have already come to pass in ways we did *not* anticipate. Maybe this apocalyptic vision was actually one you've only *just* experienced. A foretaste of something yet simmering around and within us – a boiling conflagration of events just waiting to ignite and turn the world on its head.

Jesus says, “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.”

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I wonder how many of us skipped a Thanksgiving dinner this year because we just weren't ready to face the conversations that we worried would ensue. I wonder how many holiday dinners had places set for friends and family members who never showed because they just didn't want to debate. Tables where grand stories were told, now awkward, as avoidance devolves into silence. Places at the table that have always been occupied, now vacant. Jesus says: “In those times, two will be in the field; one will go absent, and one will be left...” In these times, many will gather around tables; some may go absent, some will remain.

It does feel somehow apocalyptic in its own way, doesn't it?

The projection of the words in Matthew, feels like it came to pass in a way we were not expecting – not anticipating.

Am I saying that then the world must be coming to an end? Heavens no! I mean, I don't think so. But I know folks who opted out of their own family's Thanksgiving dinners because they just couldn't face the people that they loved – people that they continue to love.

I can't help but wonder if that's because we all just need a little room to breathe. We all have this ache within that can only be calmed with a little breathing room. Advent is a sacred time to step back, to learn from these things, and not live in them.

We lit the first Advent candle today. Appropriately, it is the candle of Hope. We find room to breathe in its presence, because lighting this candle is a contemplative act. We step back and remember that when Jesus says that he will come at an unexpected hour, it is not a warning. It is an opportunity to hope in the coming Kingdom on Earth, as it is in Heaven.

Maybe some of you know my mom's favorite poet, May Sarton. In her poem, "The Turning of the Wind," she writes, "We cannot hear each other. Truth gets lost. / Lack of rapport has damaged the whole range / Of what we might redeem that pain has cost. So love waits for the winds to change." Love waits for fresh air to breathe.

We stand back; we give ourselves some space, and we find room to breathe.

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The Unitarian Universalist hymnal has a piece written by Sarah Dan Jones shortly after September 11, 2001. The refrain in her song goes: "When I breathe in, I'll breathe in peace. When I breathe out, I'll breathe out love." Imagine singing that over and over and over again; imagine allowing it to inhabit your heart as a mantra: "When I breathe in, I'll breathe in peace; when I breathe out, I'll breathe out love."

I can't help but wonder – and I look at the choir here – I can't help but wonder if this is why music is such a profound expression of who we are. We breathe out love when we sing. We can watch the choir breathe out love as they share anthems with us. We can feel it. Amen? Sometimes room to breathe, is that opportunity to sing a little song to ourselves while we walk down the street; sometimes room to breathe – away from the world out there – is that opportunity

we have every Sunday to pick up a hymnal join the rhythm of our own breathing with those who breathe in peace *with us*, and breathe out love *for us*.

It is a sacred resuscitation of the soul.

The instrument that so often accompanies us with the graceful touch of Michelle's fingertips, is a breathing instrument. With the bellows resting beneath this sanctuary, the organ must inhale deeply, before it exhales the tender breath that fills the air around us. The bellows require their own room in the basement, next to the shop downstairs, because they, too, need room to breathe.

Breathing isn't always easy – even though it's an automatic motion of our muscles and tissues. Yoga teaches us that when our muscles contract and we feel constricted – when there are places we feel tight and achy, the practice we should follow is to breathe *into* those painful places. Yoga masters don't tell us to avoid the spots in our body where our muscles are tight, but instead to notice that tightness, to stretch slowly, and to *breathe into* those places. Fill them with oxygen, pay attention to them, be gentle with them, and never stop giving them air. Shouldn't we do the same with the uncomfortable places in our lives – in the relationships wound up tightly, the wounds still present in the scar tissue of broken hearts?

Women, who have experienced pregnancy, have learned breathing exercises. When pregnant, we call it “expecting.” So, during our own time of expectation, in preparation for “days to come,” we remember to breathe – to breathe deeply, and not allow our anticipation to turn to anxiety; to breathe regularly, and not to hyperventilate. We remember that breathing can be about bringing life into the world. Something new is emerging and we are experiencing labor pains. We pray for a Holy entrance in which this new life comes with every breath we breathe – “When I breathe in, I'll breathe in peace; when I breathe out, I'll breathe out love.”

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The Hebrew word “*ruach*,” is the word used to talk about God’s breath. It is the wind that is described in the Hebrew Bible, the breath of life. It is breath imparted in all living things. It is this sacred breath that animates.

If you were a fan of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, you might remember how the story ends – how the long winter finally gives way to Spring. The Lion, Aslan, enters the castle of his foe and finds all the creatures that had been turned to stone. What does he do? He breathes on them. He breathes on them the *ruach* – the breath of life. Slowly they are reanimated and spring – that earthy time of new life washes over the land.

The journey into Narnia is much like the beginning of Advent. We tumble out of the back of the wardrobe into a story we know so well, but a story that is new every time it’s told. Into the cool winter we are drawn. At the outset, the trek into the forest is lit by a single lamppost, just as the entrance into Advent is marked with a single candle. In both cases, it is the light of hope; it casts away darkness and reminds us that no matter how dark the night of this season, there will always be a flickering star pointing us toward Bethlehem, and new life that awaits.

It may feel like a long journey, but it is one that begins today with anticipation and hopefulness. It may feel like it’s a tiring expedition, but remember to breathe –

And when you breathe in, breathe in God’s peace.

When you breathe out, breathe out God’s love.

May that peace and love be the sustenance you need, the sustenance the world needs to make it to the foot of the manger and be filled with life anew.

May it be so.

