

November 27, 2022
First Sunday of Advent, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

It seems to me as if the market for Advent calendars has recently taken off. Maybe I'm just slow to catch on, but until a few years ago, all I ever noticed were those simple chocolate Advent calendars. You know the kind I mean: it's a thin cardboard box with 24 pull-out windows, and behind each window is a piece of chocolate. Not fancy chocolate, by the way. They are, after all, intended for children.

These days, inexpensive milk chocolate is not the only Advent calendar option for kids. There is, for example, the National Geographic Rock, Mineral & Fossil Advent calendar. Ads for it began showing up in my social media feeds months ago. Just last week, I stumbled upon an ad for Lego Advent calendars. Because I like to build things, I was tempted enough to click. I quickly learned that five Lego Advent calendars are available this year, including ones themed around Harry Potter, Guardians of the Galaxy, and Star Wars. The box for the Star Wars version shows Lego R2-D2, Lego C-3PO, and Lego Darth Vader all gathered around a Christmas tree. Maybe there really can be peace on Earth.

If you are an adult who doesn't like Legos, fear not: Advent calendars aren't just for kids anymore. Adults can go "traditional" by choosing among the many Advent calendars containing pieces of fancy chocolate, but the possibilities are endless. To name just a few, there are Advent calendars featuring cookies, jam, candles, socks, or beauty products. Preparing for this sermon, I googled the term "Advent calendars." One of the top returns was a New York Times story from ten days ago with the title, "The Pleasure of the Luxe Advent Calendar: Here are five opulent options on the market this year." The highest-end option of the five is from Tiffany & Company. Here's what the article said about it:

Tiffany & Company has [a] four-foot-tall Advent calendar made of wood that looks like a stack of boxes. The store is doing a collaboration using Andy Warhol's greeting card designs. When it's opened, it reveals 24 boxes in Tiffany's signature blue. The calendar is grand and lovely!

But that's not the point. The point is that "clients can work with their preferred client adviser to curate the perfect Advent calendar."

Among the suggestions for filling the boxes of that Advent calendar are a \$15,000 Tiffany necklace and \$6800 Tiffany bangles.¹ Needless to say, none of these Advent calendars have a thing to do with church.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It's the first day of the new church year, the first day of the season during which we anticipate both the historical first and the promised second coming of Jesus our savior. It's a season of waiting, but also a season of preparation. As you could see from the image at the top of your bulletin, the four Sundays of Advent are commonly assigned the themes of hope, peace, love, and joy. The liturgical color is purple or blue. I like to use blue for Advent, to set it apart from Lent. Lent is the season of repentance. While Advent includes some repentance, it's repentance "lite," or repentance within the larger theme of preparation. I like to think of Advent as the time of year for deep diving.

I love Advent. I love Advent, but let me be clear: that's not because Advent has always been a part of my life, and it's not because Advent has always been pleasant for me. During Advent I have experienced a wholly disproportionate number of my life's highest highs and my life's lowest lows. I can't really explain it. It's partly coincidental, and it's partly not. Most of those high highs and low lows occurred when I lived in Vermont.

Backing up, I don't remember a thing about Advent from my childhood. I grew up in the Roman Catholic Church, which observes the same liturgical seasons as the Episcopal Church. But I don't remember learning anything about Advent. I can't explain that, either. I had eight years of catechism, but that must not have been enough to make up for my parents' sporadic participation in church.

After leaving church as a teenager, I finally returned in my mid-30s. I still didn't really notice Advent until the year I was 38. That year, I didn't just notice Advent; that year, Advent happened to me. I think both the specific geography and the specific church were important in this. I was coming up on my second winter of living in Vermont; I had found the Episcopal Church, and my Episcopal church, just that November. In Vermont, liturgical brightness rests within literal darkness.

Starting that year, every year I was in Vermont, I would fight off seasonal depression by spending Advent counting down the days to the winter solstice. The church I found that year—the church that claimed me that Advent—would eventually be the location for my two ordinations and my marriage, all of which took place during Advent.

Noticing that makes me wonder whether *love* is the correct word for my feelings about Advent. Nonetheless, *love* is the word I return to. Maybe that's because, when I look back, I realize that it took both highs and lows to make me who I am. For all of it, for all of me, Advent provided a container—a container, or perhaps a crucible. Maybe our true loves are crucibles, within which our very selves are subject to a refining fire.

Jan Richardson is an author, artist, and United Methodist minister. Just yesterday, as a lead-in to Advent this year, she posted these words:

It is almost Advent, again. I know how hopeful that is. And I know how hard it can be.

For so many, December is an intense swirl of sorrow and stress. The season has a way of opening our most vulnerable places of memory as we also navigate the expectations of cheerfulness this time of year holds. When folks tell me about wanting to hide under the covers until the new year, I understand.

I have also come to know in my bones the fierce hope that lives so deeply in Advent—a hope that draws us beyond complicated holiday cheer and into a season luminous with mystery and possibility. At the heart of Advent is the story of love that comes to us, that crosses a seemingly impossible distance to meet us, that enters into our life and every single thing it holds. No matter what.²

Jan Richardson closed that post with a poem. It's called "On That Night: A Blessing," so I guess it's a poem and a blessing, and it goes like this:

On that night when
you are holding
your very last hope,
thinking to let it go
as too small to be saved
or sanctified;
on that night when
you turn away at last
from the far horizon
over which you had thought
your life would come
to find you;
on that night,
believe me,
this is where
the ache
will give way
to the mystery
and the blessing
that seemed so distant
will quietly
come to meet you,
holding your heart
in its two
luminous hands.

Here in Connecticut, my seasonal mood swing isn't as low as it was in Vermont, but still there's a swing. This year, the resetting of the clocks hit me like a hammer, and I've been frustratingly tired. I want to be like a small furry animal that holes up in a warm den until the winter solstice. But, you know, that's not the only reason I want to hole up right now. I want to hole up because it's time to hole up. It's time to sit and ponder and breathe. It's time to contemplate God and the world and my own place in the world.

Maybe you can relate. But the thing is, none of us is going to hole up in a warm den until Christmas. We all have things to do. Still, it's Advent, and maybe we can draw some inspiration from those new-fangled non-church Advent calendars. I'm thinking most specifically of that Advent calendar from Tiffany & Company. I can't imagine that anyone here would actually want a Tiffany necklace. But maybe there are more valuable things we could put in inside. Let me repeat what the article said is the point of the Tiffany & Company Advent calendar: "The point is that 'clients can work with their preferred client adviser to curate the perfect Advent calendar.'"

What if your client advisor was God? What if you let God help you curate your own perfect Advent calendar? What would be in it?

Those are things worth pondering this season of Advent.

Notes

¹ Marisa Meltzer, "The Pleasure of the Luxe Advent Calendar: Here are five opulent options on the market this year," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2022, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/17/style/luxury-advent-calendar-christmas.html> (accessed November 28, 2022).

² Jan Richardson, in a Facebook post on November 26, 2022.