

## Vitamins for the Holidays

Jamaica Plain, December 2, 2001, Rev. Terry Burke

Today we enter the season of Advent, with its fashionable liturgical color of purple. Advent is the season of four weeks before Christmas, a time of waiting and watching, a time to reflect on the meaning of the season and the meaning of the seasons of our lives. For years we have had church members light advent candles, as Emerson Stamps did today, and share a hope for the holidays.

On the first Sunday in Advent I typically do a sermon entitled "Vitamins for the Holidays." This title comes from a former church member (now an active Pentecostal Christian) who pointed out the enormous stress and impossible expectations of the Christmas/Hanukkah season, especially for those with a history of painful family backgrounds and abuse. During this service I have us read the Christmas Pledge from the useful book *Unplug the Christmas Machine*, and I ask you, "How many days are there in Christmas?" You answer, loudly, "Twelve." I then assure you that you don't have to have every present bought and card sent by December 24, as there are twelve days to Christmastide. "On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me..."

This year, instead of talking about vitamins for the holidays, perhaps we should talk about antibiotics, or maybe, gas masks. A thoughtful friend said to me this week, concerning the events of September 11th, "We've had the Apocalypse without the Second Coming." Instead of the Biblical sun and moon falling from the sky, we've had falling planes. The Apocalyptic Second Coming of a God of justice is a traditional Advent theme, though one I've seldom used. This year, we have had the terrible disasters, without the coming of God's justice. What comes next?

The great Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden wrote in today's passage, from his Christmas oratorio "For the Time Being," of a profound sense of emptiness, reflecting his World War Two era as well as that of his 1st century narrator. The ordinary cycles of life

have seemed to stop, and existence goes on with a sense of meaningless unreality, as if we had entered the "room behind the mirror." The trials of "winter and war" are preferable to this "Void" of silence. Auden's world seems to reflect our time.

Life goes on after September 11th. We are told to go about our usual business, and buy things to help the faltering economy; perhaps we should be a bit more wary of potential dangers about us. Then again, maybe we should microwave our mail to protect ourselves from anthrax. Flying, especially abroad as a friend of mine is doing this week, seems almost like a life or death decision.

Our country is engaged in a military operation to bring the perpetrators of these heinous attacks to justice, and to end an oppressive regime, of our own creation, which has been harboring the terrorists. We are deeply concerned for the safety of military personnel involved in this action, and pray for their loved ones. For those long concerned with peace issues, even a potentially just war raises ambiguous feelings. Such feelings are accentuated by our Air Force dropping bombs from B-52s at 40,000 feet, and by the recent extermination of all the revolting Taleban prisoners.

Back at home, my friend Steve Paquin, manager of the Muster Field Farm in North Sutton, New Hampshire tells me that the talk where he lives is "Nuke 'em." Steve has opened up our church tree cutting expedition at the farm to the wider public and designated it as a chance to "Walk for peace" in the holy woods. Closer to home, the city of Boston forced the Jamaica Pond Project to take down its United Nations flag at the Pond; people had complained to the Parks Commission. The United Nations flag had been flown next to the American flag. Our church standing committee voted this week to provide a refuge in our sanctuary for that UN flag.

Our lesson today of Psalm 122 calls for us to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem." I spent Friday morning as part of an off the record dialogue of Jewish and Christian leaders on the situation in the Middle East. It was a fascinating experience. How are we to pray and act to secure the peace of Jerusalem and the Middle East? The peace of Jerusalem would

seem to require: a safe and secure state of Israel, its existence truly acknowledged by its Arab neighbors; a viable Palestinian homeland; and an end to the relentless cycle of violence, which has included the bombing of restaurants and the killing of children. How are we to pray and act to secure the peace of Jerusalem, especially given the leadership of Israel and the Palestinians?

God only knows, but we must continue trying.

So we wait. What comes next? So far, the crisis has heightened the experiences of those with depression, anxiety, and troubled relationships. The state of the economy after September 11th causes people to worry about their jobs. What comes next in this unreal world. We don't know, but as people try to go about their daily routines, they are afraid.

How do we as a religious community deal with this fearful waiting? We wait together, and share our fears as well as our hopes. We deal with fear by showing our gratitude to God and one another by being thankful for the countless gifts we have already been given. I remember when I was a student minister in the Black church people would say, "Thank you, God, that I was able to get up and get out of bed this morning." Our food, shelter, clothing, health, freedom, work, friends...these are simple, but precious gifts to be grateful for.

What are the gifts worth waiting for this Advent season? The gifts of our hearts' desire – love, God, justice and peace on earth. German anti-Nazi martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that waiting during the season of Advent was like being in his prison cell, "In which one waits and hopes and does various unessential things...but is completely dependent on the fact that the door to freedom has to be opened from the outside." For Bonhoeffer, only others and God can open that door to freedom and justice.

While we wait in Advent, we can do small, seemingly "unessential" acts of gratitude and hope. We can walk for peace in the New Hampshire woods. We can pray with the Wednesday prayer group in the Morse Room. We can pray at home, or in the Arboretum,

or on the subway. We can collect videos for the Shattuck AIDS unit, or baby clothes for moms in need. We can go caroling at the Shattuck. We can learn more about other faiths, or the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization's community organizing. We can speak out when people talk prejudice. We can put coins in a Guest at Your Table Box. We can let our legislators know what we think about the state budget cuts. We can do something special for a child. We can be reconciled to a friend. We can look, listen, and notice.

May we watch and wait together as a community of faith this Advent. May we take small steps, one day at a time, toward a world of love and justice. May we watch and wait so as to learn how to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, for the peace of Boston, for the peace of our world, and for our own inner peace. May our prison doors open to the possibilities of love, God, and justice and peace on earth.

May we be vitamins/simple gifts of spiritual health for one another, and our world.