



A Season of Hope, Anticipation & Longing: An Advent Message from the Rt. Rev. Shannon MacVean-Brown

My dear people of The Episcopal Church in Vermont, I remember sitting in this very room following the discernment retreat nine months ago, wondering what life might be like here with you. I could see and feel your spirit of wonder, ready to discover what God might be up to in a new chapter of ministry. As a diocesan family, I was filled with hope, anticipation and longing.

In some ways, it reminded me of Mary's bold yes. There was no provisional yes held back by fears of what she didn't have, her status as a woman, or any other thing she could have used as a partial commitment to her yes. She couldn't really know what she had gotten herself into, but she knew that it was about giving of herself, proclaiming justice, and being part of God's plan for redeeming the world. Here we are in Advent, this season of anticipation and longing, preparing for Jesus's birth, seeking his appearance in our lives daily and hoping for his final return.

Every advent I feel the weight of all the shoulds. You should slow down to enjoy this season. You should spend time and money giving back to those who are less fortunate. You should not spend too much money on Christmas gifts. Or the opposite: You should spend money on any and everything according to the advertisements. Of course, world events continue to take up space in my psyche on top of my daily routine, I'm sure I'm not alone in this. Is there any wonder that this can be a stressful and for some depressing time of the year in some ways?

I think feeling this weight is exactly where we should be. As the earth takes her yearly rest from the stresses of growing and contending with the environment we've created, we too are offered a

chance to take in all that impacts our lives and to feel dormant, even as growth is waiting to happen under the surface when given a chance. I'm grateful for this season of living with the dissonance of the never-ending shoulds: Hope, anticipation and longing. At the center of this friction is where our hopes, longing and anticipation for our world begin. I'm reminded of this passage from the eighth chapter of Romans, and Paul says:

22-25 All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

26-28 Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. She does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. She knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

- Romans 8:22-28 MSG

Our scrappy little diocese has long embraced an identity of a people who are mighty but small, doing much with little. What I've noticed in my short time with you is that we are pregnant with so much possibility.

I've also noticed that we have an abundance of resources available to us for the ministry we're called to. I wonder what would happen if we use the measure of justice, love and generosity as an accountability tool for whatever we do in our life together, as we make decisions asking ourselves: Is this action or decision just? Does it support justice? Is this action or decision about love or loving? Is this action or decision generous? Does it celebrate and give thanks for God's generosity? Believe me, this is not the way the world operates.

I don't know that this was Mary's method to making a decision to say yes to God's answer to the world's needs. But I do know that Mary was faced with an incredible choice that ultimately supported justice, was about love, and celebrated God's generosity in Mary's womb. The hopes and fears of generations became God's love in human form. As people of Advent, my prayer is that, like Mary, our yes would be bold, and that all our concerns and our yearning for the world would take new form and ministry that celebrates God's abundance.

Peace and love to you all.

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