

Well, my good friends, since we are embarked into this season of Advent, into this time of preparation and expectation, and since for this old man, some repentance is always part of preparation, let me confess that this is not the sermon I intended or imagined I would be preaching this morning. There were signs, as there almost always are if we are paying attention--signs that the meditations of my heart were shifting, sermon-wise, were shifting, and that therefore it was likely the words that would eventually come out of my mouth might not be the ones I had planned on, say last Monday afternoon. And indeed, these words are not those words.

What changed, you might ask? Surely the lection is reliable. Surely the wolf will lie with the lamb. Surely the nursing child and the weaned child alike will clamber all over the hole of the asp and the adder's den and no harm will come to them. Surely the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Holy One as the waters cover the sea. Surely our hope--our hope that a time will come when the poor will find justice and there will be an abundance of peace, our hope that is so eloquently spelled out by the Psalmist today--surely that hope is there to preach. Surely Paul's testimony to those early Roman Christians that Christ's powerful love and righteousness is expansive and inclusive is as powerful a text this Advent morning as ever it has been.

And yes, surely there are human beings wrapped in wisdom and self-righteousness coming out to the thousands of would-be Jordan Rivers of our nation to be baptized to whom you can preach with John the Baptizer, “You brood of vipers, do not presume! Just don’t! Do not presume your righteousness is God’s righteousness. Do not!”

And surely that preached adjuration would usher into a place appropriate to repentance and expectation and sure that would count as preparation for the coming of our Savior.

And yes, it is certain that One *is* coming, indeed *is come even now* into our midst, into this very community, whose sandals this preacher, this old man, is not worthy to carry, even for a minute, even though that is what he, what each of us must somehow do, confident in the grace and love of God.

And yes. All that is true. But none of those many sermons is, this morning, my sermon, although they are all there for the preaching. *And insofar as each of your hearts is your heart's truest preacher, have at it! Though chastened you may be, as we often are when we search our hearts deeply and honestly, you will be enriched. You will not, finally be disappointed.*

My sermon, though, is not quite any of those, though one way or another it touches on a bit of all of them, and more. As I wended my way through this last week, my first week with you as your Interim Rector; as I lived into its many many hours and its revelatory moments aplenty, and its occasional major unexpected--what? I would say Easter Egg, but that would take us way too soon out of this Advent time, so I'll just say the occasional big surprise; as I sat with some of you in deep conversation; as I began to meet in exploration and curiosity, a very mutual curiosity I should add, with St. Martin's varied and gifted staff, and to begin to plan the days and weeks ahead; as I joined with the Vestry in a really peculiar hybrid yet very productive meeting; as I sat at the powerful feet of one of the Episcopal Church's great feminist theologians, Flora Keshgegian and absorbed her lecture about words and power and inclusion, and its exclusions; and as Barb Thomson and Laura Palmer and I sat around a table in the Parish House and wrapped up and signed the Letter of Agreement that is the legal ballast to bear Laura into ministry here with us as Priest Associate starting the Monday before Christmas; and as I sat with the Choristers as they sang Jingle Bells just for me--entrancing and delighting me as they will you on Christmas Eve if you time it right; and later as sat with Tyrone and Sean and the choir's section leaders for a little relaxed hanging out after

choir rehearsal and then removed with Ty and Sean to begin to map out next week's celebration, right here, of the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe; and I listened and engaged and did some stewardship work and parish problem solving--as I did all of that across a very full week, I found my heart and meditations shifting to a different place.

And then, yesterday, Louis and I went with one of our very best friends to New York to celebrate his birthday and to see Wendall Pierce and Sharon D. Clarke in Arthur Miller's great American tragedy, *Death of A Salesman*, it all came clear.

And I will tell you this: if you want to experience a life change, a heart change, go now and see what happens when you make that Salesman, struggling with crushed hope and human failure and deep anger, his last little flickers of hope and love dying in his tears right in front of your face--when you make that Salesman Black. See what happens when his long-suffering unflaggingly loving wife Linda is embodied on stage as a Black mother, the mast and rudder of a Black family. She is fierce. Fierce! She is fierce in her love and fierce in her very clear, heartbreaking love-infused contempt for her two broken adult sons. And when that Willie Loman and those Loman brothers--when that Black triad lands in Miller's already

unrelentingly unjust world as Black men, the world, my world, pretty much shattered.

Because yesterday, Miller's tragedy was not just the great tragedy of shattered hopes and dreams and of betrayal and of the wearing down of the human Spirit. Yesterday, all that was suddenly, powerfully transformed and powerfully magnified as a story about the whole huge sin and the thousand attendant wounds of white American racism. Yesterday, I was convicted again. I sat in this huge Broadway theater, for the first time in my long life as full of Black as of white people, and understood again that I am standing there by the river Jordan and hearing the Baptist cry: repent. The Advent of God is near. Pay attention.

You know, it's easy to recite the words of our liberal creeds, to proclaim that we intend to be about the work of repair and restoration and that we mean to change the things that make us perforce exclude those who are not us. But that attending to is not the same as doing the work of love which is the hard fierce work of becoming truly inclusive, of forgetting, or at least demoting the word "welcoming" and trying instead to be a place of God that is, not only by word, but also and always by deed, by the proof of the experience of it, a place that never, by its language, never by its his's, and its imperial kings, and its colonial lords, never by its icons, never by the stain of its

stained glass, *never ever says to anyone of God's children that they are other*. We who are God's children must become, we must actively become, by our words, by our deeds, by our lives, neither Jew, nor Gentile, nor any other other, except the whole open wounded healing heart of God.

So if the efforts to make the language of our worship today more expansive and more inclusive make you a little, or even a lot uneasy, or uncomfortable, or maybe even a little mad, I invite you to examine those feelings in the light of the God of peace and of unimaginably, powerfully, all-embracing love who holds us all, with all our struggle and all our hope, who holds us with all that are, tight in their fierce love and who will never ever let us go.

And may that God of hope, of our only real hope, fill us--in that reflective, preparative endeavor, an endeavor we avoid only at great peril to our souls--fill us with all joy and peace, that we may abound in that hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because in this Advent work, there is, I promise, I testify, fullness of joy...fullness of joy! For evermore. Amen.