

December 6, 2020 (Focus: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Second Advent)

For such a time as this, we need peace. But in such a time as this, peace can be quite elusive. There is much going on in the world, and in our collective and individual lives that we long for peace, but find it fleeting at best. Even the slightest thing these days can set a person off, reactions far out of proportion, and we can understand that because our own sense of margin, of ability to withstand struggles of the day, are thin indeed. We find ourselves snapping at things more often, and we know this is not who we really are, but, well, it's a sign of the times. Where can we find some peace these days?

I was thinking about this as I read an article in the NYT this week about habits. The author, Kate Murphy, wrote about how in this pandemic people are missing their old routines. Now, for some, the word "routine" elicits thoughts of boredom and dullness. But as Murphy points out in her article, "psychologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists and neurobiologists have written countless books and research papers on the topic" of how humans are creatures of habit, and this can be a good thing if the habits are for a good reason. They say humans are "prediction machines," in the sense that we have evolved to minimize surprise. Long ago, surprises would be things like running into a tiger while out hunting or sinking into quicksand. In one way, routines, that is things we do over and over and don't get hurt or die in the process, help give our brains a little peace of mind.

But the other way that habits help our brains get a little peace is that habits conserve precious brainpower. If we have the habit of always putting our keys on the hook by the back door, then we don't have to use up more brainpower remembering where we put our keys last. And if we go to the same yoga class each week, and always have Friday date night with our significant other, and pay bills the first of the month, and go to church on Sunday, well, then we don't have to expend energy making decisions about what exercise class we should go to or when should we have date night or when should I pay bills or should I go to church this week. Routines and rituals help conserve precious brainpower for higher functions and needs, including recognizing subtleties, resolving contradictions, developing creative ideas, and even finding joy and meaning in life. Yes, routines and rituals can help bring some peace into our lives.

But as the author of this article points out, the pandemic has messed up a lot of our routines, and this has contributed to the messing up of our sense of inner peace. At first I think a lot of us thought the same thing: this won't last very long, so I can hold out on doing my regular routines for a little while. But of course

those of us who thought we'd be back to normal by now were very much mistaken. So by now many *have* been adaptive, have developed some new routines, and that, experts say, is the best way to handle such a time as this. In temporary situations like the pandemic, they say that we are better off establishing some new routines even for the short haul. We shouldn't get so stuck in how we want it to be that we fail to adapt and be fluid to what is. And that isn't just for COVID, it's a good practice for other interruptions we face in life, like illness, job changes, retirement, etc.

So here we are in Advent, with Christmas around the corner, and these are times that we had definite routines around, beloved routines, activities and gatherings and such. And we ache for those routines. Our hearts long for those beloved routines, even as our heads know we can't have them safely this year. So we need to adapt. To get some peace of mind for ourselves we can adopt some new routines for this season, things we can rely on, some sort of regular activity or ritual that we can do where we don't have to think too much about what to do so our brains don't get paralyzed in decision making but yet are rituals that give us a sense of the season and feed our spirits.

We are doing one of those routines right now, coming to church in this new way, and its become a routine that has gotten more comfortable over the weeks, thanks be to God, as we've negotiated some new technology. And we have a ritual for our homes, with our home advent kits and our coloring page, at least for me I've taken them up as daily ritual to help me find a place of rest, or peace in my day.

There are lots of rituals or routines you can and maybe already have adopted during this time of COVID, like a daily walk or family game night or zoom gatherings or sending out cards or making calls or maybe you've adopted a new pet. And these new routines are good. We cannot control everything that happens in life. These routines give us some predictable rhythm to life, and this frees our brains to develop perspective so that we are better able to take life's surprises in stride.

There is one other suggestion I have for a ritual or routine for this Advent season, inspired in part by other psychological research, and inspired in part by our Advent scripture stories.

That ritual is a ritual of gratitude. We hear a lot these days about keeping gratitude journals or gratitude lists, and how just writing down something you are

grateful for each day, no matter what is going on in life, can over time really affect your view on life, and yes, can give you peace of mind and peace of heart.

Now, let's be honest, there may be some days now when it is a challenge to be grateful. We are too close to the pain, too close to the anxiety, too close to the fear, too close to the uncertainty. And this is where the scripture stories can help us. The prophets, when talking with their people in exile or when they returned to a very different Jerusalem than when they left, the prophets told their people to remember about Abraham and Sarah, and what God promised them, and how they couldn't at first believe God's promises, but eventually they came true. And the prophets and the psalmists reminded people in difficult times to remember how God saved the Israelites from slavery and brought them through the wilderness and to the promised land. And then there was Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth and father to John who would be called the Baptist. And there was Mary of Nazareth, engaged to be married to Joseph. And both Zechariah and Mary were living in difficult times for their people, yet they could give thanks when they remembered the stories of their ancestors and how they were saved by God. In other words, scripture has many stories of people remembering what they have been grateful for in the past in order to make it through some difficult time in the present.

So we can do a similar thing. When the current circumstances are such that it is difficult to come up with things to be grateful for, we can look to our own histories. We can remember when things weren't great but someone or something helped us to know that we would get through, we would endure. We can remember those times when we got through something difficult, when we demonstrated resilience, when we fought through the struggle. We all have such memories, for we are all human and human life has its struggles for all of us. So I invite you to join me in this new routine for the rest of this Advent and Christmas season and through the winter if you'd like. At least a couple of times a week, if not every day, think of or better yet right down a memory of a time when things weren't great at Christmas time, but somehow you got through it, and express gratitude for the getting through, and express gratitude for those who helped you get through. And if you have happy Christmas memories, write or think on them too.

This Advent and Christmas, things are not as we want, in fact things are not going well, but we will be ok, for we are God's people, we are God's creation, and God intends good for us. We do not know when the fullness of God's time will come,

but we do know that whatever the times are like, we have the fullness of God's love and the fullness of God's saving grace. And thanks be to God!

After the postlude I invite you to stay and share, if you'd like a story from your past of a Christmas or life memory where somehow you made it through a struggle, and someone (including yourself) got you through it.

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Communion prayer

On the night before he was to face trial, Jesus gathered with his disciples. He took the bread that was on the table, he blessed it and gave God thanks for it, then he broke the bread and shared it with his disciples saying “take and eat, this is my body, which is given for you. Whenever you do this, do so in remembrance of me.” Likewise after supper he took the cup that was on the table. Again he blessed it and gave God thanks for it, then he shared it with his disciples saying “take and drink, this is my blood which represents the new covenant of love and forgiveness of sins. Whenever you share this cup, do so in remembrance of me.” And so we share this bread and cup, and remember all that Christ is in his birth and his life and ministry, all that Christ is in his death and his resurrection, and all that he is in the living Christ made known in and among us all.

Let us pray: Come Holy Spirit come. Bless this bread and bless this fruit of the vine, and bless us in our eating and drinking at your expansive table, that our minds and hearts and souls may be open to receive the grace you offer, and ever open to share such love and grace with all those in need. Amen.

Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer. Creator God, gracious God, we are grateful for your love each day, a love that sparks our own loving to the world. We rely on your gracious mercy in these days; do not forsake us. Remind us again and again that your Spirit is indeed always at work in the world. Help us to see it, to recognize it when it is blessing us and strengthening us and encouraging us.

There are so many among us, in our community, and in the world suffering in body, mind, and spirit, in need of your healing compassion and care – grant all in need an experience of your renewing touch, especially...

Bless those for whom the isolation is weighing on their mental and emotional well-being. We hold in our prayers today especially all those working in area health care facilities – hospitals and nursing homes and first responders – for they are feeling the strains of the rising COVID cases. Give them strength, and grant them rest, and keep them well.

Moment of silent meditation...

Gracious God, as we await anew for the coming of Emmanuel, as we wait to feel you with us anew, fill us with peace. We pray for peace in our world – an end to war and violence on our streets and in our homes. Without peace there can be no justice, and we so seek justice for all those who have experienced discrimination and a lack of welcome. We pray for peace in our minds and in our hearts, as we struggle with how to care but not be overwhelmed by the caring. We know you intend peace for us, for we have heard it in the words of our teacher and spiritual guide and savior, the one we call the Prince of Peace, in whose name we pray. Amen.