

Sermon  
Dec. 10, 2017  
Second Sunday in Advent  
Based on Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13  
Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

When it was time for lights out in my house growing up, my dad would come upstairs where mine and my sister's bedrooms were. He would turn off my light, say good night, and close my door. This little ritual that took place most nights gave me a sense of security. My mom was a homemaker. This meant that I never came home after school to an empty house. Back in those days we only had one T.V. There were many evenings when my sister and I would be in the living room watching T.V. while dad sat in his green upholstered lazy boy that had a massage feature controlled by a black dial. He would be sitting there reading the paper or a book. And mom would be somewhere else in the house doing something. At dinner time we would all sit around the table at the same places. Dad would say grace. Denise and I would try to make each other laugh when one of us was drinking their milk to see if we could get the other to squirt milk out their nose. Being at home with mom and dad when I was growing up was a place of comfort and mostly peace. My sister would tell you I was more often the instigator although I will always deny it.

Our family had traditions throughout the year that brought us together. We always took a vacation in August. We got in the station wagon towing a pop up trailer and drove all through the west, stopping at KOA camps and visiting the surrounding sites. And then a month or so after we got back my dad would set up the slide projector, set up the screen, load up the carousel and we would review our adventures one slide click at a time. And, of course, we had our Christmas traditions. Denise and I would sneak down in the middle of the night to peek and see what lay under the tree. And then, when it was too early, we would slip in to mom and dad's room to wake them up so we could open our presents. Later in the day we went to my dad's brother's house for dinner and to watch football. We would then drive home later that night.

I would look out the car window, looking at the stars, full of contentment, my eyes heavy with sleep.

I hope my experience growing up was like yours. I hope you have a lot of fond memories of growing up, that you had a mom and dad that were there for you, giving you a sense of security. I hope your childhood was, for the most part, a peaceful one. I hope you grew up with family traditions that brought the family together, especially around Christmas time. Family traditions centered around being together at home is so much of what this season is about.

Of course, for many of us, the homes of our childhood are gone. We no longer live where we grew up. Our moms and dads have passed away. Some of us have lost some or all of our siblings as well. Some of us have lost a spouse. We don't do Christmas now like we used to growing up. The memories are all we have now. They are precious. Those memories stir up a sense of comfort, a good dose of sentimentality. But we can't relive our childhood. Our lives move in one direction.

We still need to experience security and comfort. We still need to have moments where we are surrounded by those who love us, a space where there is peace. We build our own families, get married, have our own children. Or we make friends who are like family to us. We surround ourselves with people who care about us, who are faithful to us, who love us through thick and thin. And we make new traditions, or modify the ones we grew up with. One of my traditions I picked up after my parents passed away was to stop by Kim's parent's house, where I would help her mom make snickerdoodle cookies and home-made lasagna for friends and neighbors. We do what we can so that our homes can be a space that is secure and peaceful. Not always peaceful. But we try to do what is right, treating those we love with respect, extend grace, offer and receive forgiveness, serve each other, so that those we are bound to by love are cared for and safe.

This is part of what the season of Advent is about. This time of year is a time of family traditions. We think about the people we send or receive holiday cards from. We pay attention to what our loved ones are interested in and what they would appreciate as we purchase gifts. Our

friendships are deepened as we have get-togethers and holiday parties, full of laughter and occasionally a white elephant gift exchange. We experience a sense of togetherness when we join strangers to marvel at holiday lights, attend various Christmas concerts, and later welcome in the new year. And let's not forget the magic of lighting our candles and singing Silent Night on Christmas Eve. Now is the time to do those things that bring us together, that foster in us a sense of peace, of being whole, our best selves.

We need this season of Advent, especially in these times. There is so much negativity in our world. Everything is politicized and polarized. There is so much division and resentment. There is uncertainty about where we are as a nation and what the future holds. It is like a world is a thick jungle of mess. In this jungle we sometimes don't know which direction is the right one. There is confusion all around. Is the tax plan passing through congress a good thing or a bad thing? Was President Trump recognizing Jerusalem as the capitol of Israel a step toward peace or not? Those are just a few of the big political issues entangling our life together. You can name your own questions and struggles you have to try to figure out. What's the right thing to do? What is God's will in this situation?

The 13<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 85 goes like this: "Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps." Him is referring to God. Who is righteousness? How does righteousness make a path for God's steps? This verse prompted me to imagine someone with a machete hacking her way through a dense jungle, clearing a path for the group, especially for the V.I.P. in the group. That got me to thinking. Last week we talked about how sometime we wish God would just show up and fix things. But today's scripture makes me wonder that for God to show up there is some advance work that we need to do. Maybe we need to cut our way through the jungle that we find ourselves in, this jungle of confusion, of divisiveness and rancor. We cut our way through the mess by how we live our lives day by day, doing the right thing moment by moment. And as we slog our way through the jungle we discover that God is right there with us, walking along the path that we are making.

But where is our path heading? What direction is your life going?

This made me think of the prodigal son. We talked about him last week too. I said that when the prodigal son took stock of his life and the mess he was in, he realized that things would be better for him if he was at home with his father. So he decided to go back home. He still had his baggage. He had not gotten rid of his mess. But at least he was going back home. To go back home, for the prodigal son, was the righteous thing to do. And so he made his way back, cutting through the thickets of doubt, of guilt, of shame, of regret, of sadness, staying focused on returning home. And when he made it back home he was embraced by his father. He experienced the steadfast love of his father. He felt whole again, at peace. In that moment, when the prodigal son and the father embraced, it was as if steadfast love and faithfulness had met, righteousness and peace kissed each other. The prodigal son heard his father speak peace to him. The father spoke to his son who had turned his heart back to his father. The path through the thickets had led to home.

Now is the time for us to cut through the thickets in our own lives and make our way back home. We have our holiday traditions that help get us there, to get us back home, wherever home is for you, that home where you feel secure and at peace. I know this time of year can be pretty noisy. But in those still, quiet moments we may hear the voice speak to us, a voice that speaks of peace. We may hear again words of forgiveness. We may yet experience again God's steadfast love and faithfulness toward us. If we pay attention, cut through all the noise and distraction, and focus on making our way back to home, we may yet experience the warm embrace of our God who whispers into our ears, "You are safe. You are loved. You are back home now."