

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

## **SLOW DOWN**

*Sermon for Advent 2B—Isaiah 40:1-11*

LPC, 12/7/14

You and I have been together so long that I worry about repeating my stories, but at the risk of doing that, I'm going to tell you about a particular Advent in my past. My children were about 4 and 6 years old. Preparing for Christmas had simply gotten out of control. In an attempt to control the hysteria, we suggested to my in-laws that we come over to their house the day after Christmas, rather than on Christmas Day. The proposal was not taken well, and there was family strife.

I had so much to do. There was baking, and shopping, and decorating, and cards to write, and planning for the trip after Christmas to see my parents in New England, and the kids were bouncing off the walls. I was upset about our extended family issues and depressed. I brought my kids to church for a Christmas pageant rehearsal and sat at the back of the church feeling miserable. And then it occurred to me. I was not responsible for Christmas. Christmas would come with or without my frantic efforts. Jesus would still come.

I thought about this some more. Jesus did not come into the world so that I could make myself mental with preparations. God did not make the supreme sacrifice to become a human baby for cookies, or Christmas cards, or decorations or all that stuff. God came into the world for love of me and the rest of the world, and would still come again this year at Christmas whether or not I did anything.

I decided then and there to declare a moratorium on Christmas activity. I talked it over with Rich and he whole-heartedly agreed. We would not put up a tree or decorate the house until just before Christmas. We would not make the traditional Christmas cookies, not yet. We would reduce the gift exchange. We would observe Advent, the season of spiritual, rather than material, preparation for Christmas.

The kids thought this was a little odd, but they didn't complain. Things got a lot calmer around the house.

That was the point at which I really understood the point of observing a discreet season of Advent, rather than rushing into Christmas right after Halloween. It all seemed so balanced and wholesome. I considered founding an organization called People for the Experience of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany to promote a more mindful and spiritual approach to the seasons. The acronym for that, appropriately enough is PEACE.

Over the years I've loosened up a bit. In the spirit of the Festival of Lights, we now decorate our house with the rest of the neighborhood on Thanksgiving weekend. But my appreciation for a quiet approach to Advent has never left me.

Naturally Christmas got less frantic as my kids grew up and moved away. However this year I have some additional stress in preparing for my third doctoral

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residency the first week in January. There are papers to write and a lot of reading to do. One thing that I have found helps is when I am particularly busy to deliberately slow down.

This doesn't make sense, does it? If a person has a lot to do the solution is surely time management or multi-tasking. I've tried time management and multi-tasking. As a matter of fact I am actually brilliant at time-management and multi-tasking. But I have found that time-management and multi-tasking tend to make just enough room in my schedule that I can be busier.

By contrast, deliberately slowing down when I am busy makes me calmer and more mindful. I found I accomplish just as much when I slow down.

Performing my usual tasks in slow mode I discover that work can be prayer. This is the insight of Brother Lawrence in his 17<sup>th</sup>-century spiritual classic *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Brother Lawrence points out that even a homely task like washing dishes can be an act of worship.

This makes me wonder how slowing down and humility may be related. I'm talking about the kind of humility that followers of Jesus need to cultivate. Humility makes room for Christ in our lives. Slowing down makes room for Christ in our lives.

I suggest making this Advent, as much as is possible in your particular situation, a time to slow down. When you find yourself getting busy, just tell yourself, "Slow."

After a couple of days of this you may well find a greater sense of peace and space in normal activity. In this space, try next to think of imparting peace to the things you touch. Think of imparting peace to the ground with your feet as you walk. You can be an instrument of God's peace, as St. Francis of Assisi would say. That is part of what the Incarnation means.

We hear today in the Prophet Isaiah about the Lord making the crooked straight and the rough places plain. This is what God is doing within us. If we let God, God will straighten out what is crooked within us. God will smooth out our roughness. This is what we are promised will happen with the coming of Jesus into the world.

Have you ever tried to straighten the clothes of a child who is squirming? Have you ever tried to file the rough fingernails of a child who is constantly running around? It's much easier to do those things if the child slows down. God wants to do those things for us but we're always squirming and running around.

Slow. Down. And let God smooth you. Let Christ come into your world. This Advent. Always. Slow.