
Advent Ideas from Faith at Work

1 message

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Sat, Dec 6, 2008 at 7:38 AM

The Mutual Ministry Monitor

A Faith at Work Communication for Church Leaders

This Issue's Theme: Advent, Call and Anxious Times

Dear Friend:

In general, Advent is a great time of year to focus on God's call. This year in particular, with its potent brew of anxiety, fear and hope, it feels right to focus on the call that abides.

Faith at Work defines call in a 'whole life' kind of way—it really is about listening for God's presence and leading in daily life. The Advent narrative provides great examples of call:

***Mary** reminds us to pray and ponder when we feel God's nudging. When the time is right (I am not convinced it happened as quickly as the scriptures seem to infer), we say some version of "let it be with me according to your word."

***Joseph** is called to stay in a relationship even when it makes no sense.

***Elizabeth** provides an example of the call to hospitality, even when it arrives on your doorstep unannounced.

***The Wise Men** listen to an invitation to take a journey—and ponder what it means to go home "by another way."

In the meantime, we have this "other way" happening right now, this financial meltdown rocking our world. Many of us are asking these and other questions:

***What should I do now that I am laid off?**

***How much should I give now that my bank balance has dropped?**

***How much should we spend on Christmas now that things are tighter?**

***Who should I help now that there are so many more people hurting?**

In Call to the Soul, Marjory Bankson defines call this way: *“Call has to do with discovering our particular field of action or the part of God’s realm that is ours to tend at any given time.”*

The Advent story provides many stories of people exploring their call. Economic uncertainty requires even more spiritual wisdom. We hope this newsletter helps you as you walk with your people in these expectant, anxious, hopeful days.

Words to Live By

Quotes to support lay ministry

"Mary proceeds—as we must do in life—making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead. I treasure the story because it forces me to ask: When the mystery of God's love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Do I ask of it what it cannot answer? Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self and say something new, a 'yes' that will change me forever?"

— Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace

"Christmas Pageant"

We try directing
the Christmas pageant
but the script is calling
for us to be onstage
for us to listen
for us to go with haste
for us to open the inn
for us to share the stable
for us to glimpse the star.

All the parts
have not been taken yet.

— Thomas John Carlisle

“Here's what I've decided: the very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it. Right now I'm living in

that hope, running down its hallways and touching the walls on both sides. I can't tell you how good it feels.”

Source: *Animal Dreams*, Barbara Kingsolver

Listen!
 Something strains to be born
 to shake itself free:
 something brand new trembles
 at the far edge of our minds:
 the shape of a world to come
 conceived in our present labor and pain.

Source: *Poems of the Hidden Way*, Catherine deVinck

Lay Empowerment Reflection Questions

Small Group/Bible Study questions to use anytime

A few suggestions from the Advent Story for your personal reflection, or small group:

***Notice, really notice—within and without.** List questions, longings, stirrings... How is God coming in your life now... in a form of desire, thirst, need?

***Be overshadowed.** Like Mary with the angel, where are you caught up in something larger than yourself?

***Make room.** Also like Mary, what do you need to clear out... to make room for what?

***Be a virgin.** Where does a radically new sense of yourself call out? What do you need to "conceive," i.e., to seize and take hold of?

***Wait actively.** What gestation, that can't be rushed, are you waiting for? Where do you need to enter the crucible of your life?

***Listen for what is hidden.** “Know the babe as that in you which has had no real place in the world which you have carefully constructed and tended over the years... Imagine the babe as the you who is a threat to emperor, king, or ruler of your world, one who has a different idea of how things ought to be...” (Source: Bill Dols, *The Bible Workbench*.)

How would you describe this new being you may know all too well?

***Go home by another way.** What is the other, new way that beckons to you, the one that also leads you home?

***Trust: Say "yes."** How are we asked to identify with Mary's costly calling? How do we respond to what Kierkegaard called "the alarming possibility of being able"?

Screen Savers

Good movies for equipping

If you are looking for a movie that combines Christmas themes with economic struggles, how about ***It's a Wonderful Life***. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It's_a_Wonderful_Life)

Another movie that lifts up images of giving and abundance in a time of scarcity is the foreign classic ***Babette's Feast***. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babette's_Feast)

Sermon Excerpt

Connecting The Word with Life

E. M. Forster has said that the most deep and terrible line written on the nativity is the last line of Yeats's poem, "The Magi":

The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

The key to the dissatisfaction of the magi is the terrible "uncontrollable." Magi were spiritual technicians. Their role was to assist people in getting control of their destinies through divinizing, augury, and horoscope. They offered means of controlling divine presences and forces through spells, charms, and rites. Human religiosity is about control. If the divine is close at hand, right here, then we can manipulate it. It is within our grasp, susceptible to our control. If, on the other hand, the divine is far away in a remote heaven, then we are on our own, and our religious practices serve just as well to calm our fears and put a spiritual gloss on our attempts to keep order.

What met the magi at Bethlehem was the mystery of divine creativity itself, which cannot be usurped or deflected; the uncontrollable mystery of God's sheer initiative, which cannot be bent or blocked.... Here is the uncontrollable mystery of Love present in all its fullness as a vulnerable baby.

All at once their potions, their horoscopes, their charts and crystals, their incantations and secret lore collapse into nothing. So they unload on the floor where the baby lies gazing at them their obsolete bag of tricks—the talismans of gold, the incense with which they fogged and scented their rituals, the myrrh they used for magic ointments. They let all these go in the presence of the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, just thirty years or so after Matthew's gospel was written, that the magi's star was the sign that with the coming of the Christ all magic was at an end. In the end, maybe the story of the magi jettisoning their bag of magic tricks at the manger is really our story. When we finally get to the bottom of our dread of God, our fear of Jesus, our evasion of the Spirit, our ambivalence about grace, we all seem to arrive at the moment of truth expressed in the simple words, "I'm afraid of letting go." All the scriptures seem to say to us then is, "That's right."

-- Rev. Martin L. Smith, formerly of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, in Cambridge, MA. From the book "Nativities and Passions: Words for Transformation" published by Cowley Publications.

The Call to Collaboration

Share the resources you have found and like

To make this newsletter a vehicle for sharing helpful information, please send us your resources on mutual ministry: Sermons on equipping people for lay ministry, church newsletter articles, quotes, questions that invite people into reflection on their call, relevant books, etc.

Or simply share with us your stories of churches that are doing something exciting in the area of equipping people for lay ministry. Write up the approach and pass it on to us. The Mutual Ministry Monitor will be the clearinghouse for this information, and we will pass it on in future issues. (If the idea of writing up something feels too time consuming, send us notes or rough manuscript, and let us get it ready.)

So...right now would you spend 30 seconds to think of a sermon, newsletter article or other item that you have done on supporting call and ministry in the world? If you send it to us, it could make a big difference for someone who needs to hear just what you wrote.

How to be in touch

To send on content to share... AND to pass on email addresses of anyone who would like to be on our distribution list, please send an email to Nina Frost at NHFrost@aol.com. If you want off this list, also contact Nina at the same address.

The Final Word

There is an interesting article on King Herod in the December issue of National Geographic. It's Available online:

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/12/herod/mueller-text>

Advent invites us to look at this key person, both as outer and inner event. For all of us, an Advent invitation is to find our own Herod, to identify the parts of you that are intent upon nothing really changing. At the same time, try to identify the babe in you who is ready to topple the Herod in your life from his or her throne. We invite you to invite parishioners to do the same.

Blessings on you all in this time of tumult, change and promise.

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