

Entering the New Year with a Hopeful Spirit

by Bentley de Bardelaben
Executive for Administration and Communications

As a Christian, one of my favorite religious seasons is Advent. It holds meaning because of its themes of hope, peace, love, and joy in anticipation of the arrival of light into a dark world; the birth of the Christ child, Emmanuel — God with us — on Christmas Day.

This season has been a challenging one for many. For months, I have received phone calls, emails, even a few letters from people who are experiencing feelings ranging from anger to apathy over what they have named as an unjust and broken justice system. While the subject matter varies, the pain expressed is similar. Many feel that just verdicts for marginalized groups have been noticeably absent in their communities. Whether the perceived bias is institutional or personal — its direct aim at one's race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, earnings, religious conviction, immigration status, or position on climate change — the sense of hurt and injustice has left so many struggling to locate hope in a season where it ought to be plentiful.

I have had days in which my soul lamented this past year also. When I search to make meaning of this topsy-turvy world, I remind myself that it is my faith and prayer life which undergirds and envelops me when things seem at their worst. I confess that does not always quell my anxiety in moments of struggle. Still, my spiritual life helps to root me in the knowledge that there have been others across the ages who had similar struggles and endured. If they could, in time, I can, too.

Theologian and scholar Walter Brueggemann writes in his bestselling book, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, that in addition to our own experience, and the testimony we see reflected in the daily newspaper and throughout literature, the Psalms of the Old Testament offer an important third way of gaining perspective on life's struggles. Scripture reminds

us, Brueggemann says, that “our life of faith consists of moving with God in terms of: (a) being securely oriented; (b) being painfully disoriented; and (c) being surprisingly reoriented. This general way of speaking can apply to our self-acceptance, our relations to significant others, our participation in public issues.”

In truth, there are times when the valleys and hills of the human experience leave me momentarily unable to comprehend what important learning is before me. I question what is happening and why. Being oriented, disoriented, and reoriented time and again as a part of the journey can be challenging, even for a seasoned spiritualist, which I am not. Fortunately, praying the Psalms, as Brueggemann purports, has been a wonderful tonic for my weary soul.

As we enter 2015, my prayer is that we will face our nation’s challenges head on, while recalling what the Advent and Christmas stories seek to tell. One such essential truth is that God loves humanity so much that God entered the world, not as an all-powerful conquering king, but as a vulnerable infant. It is a wonderful narrative which goes against the norm. Certainly a lesson such as this cannot erase the frustrations these past months have wrought. But perhaps, it may simply make such trials bearable. Wishing you and yours happiness in the New Year!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Bentley de Bardelaben is Executive for Administration and Communications for the UCC’s Justice and Witness Ministries.

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