

SEEKING EMMANUEL IN A WORLD IMMERSED IN CHAOS

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Every time we turn on the news, read the newspaper or get the latest feed on our devices, we are reminded of the chaos that permeates our world. Mass shootings, hate crimes, clerical abuse, environmental catastrophes, hateful rhetoric, divisions: this group against that group, he says, she says. It's overwhelming. This chaos spills over into our not-so-small table talk and enters our prayer space. Visual artists react to it on billboards and it is reflected in political cartoons and is even found on the comics page of the morning paper. Is it any wonder that the Oxford English Dictionary's word for 2018 is "toxic"? The lexicographers said that the word grew into an intoxicating description for the year's most talked about topics. William Butler Yeats describes it well in these lines from his poem aptly named "The Second Coming."

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

As we begin Advent 2018 our cry "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is like a primal scream that complements John the Baptist's haunting "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Do these Advent words feel any different than they did last year, five years ago, a decade ago? Although T. S. Eliot wrote his poem entitled "The Waste Land" a century ago, he might be describing how we feel as we enter this holy season in 2018.

*A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.*

Eliot's description of 20th century London is mirrored in Galway Kinnell's long poem called "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," where he describes the complexities of life in New York City's Lower East Side. In one section he introduces an Orthodox Jew who is "near burial" and a Catholic undertaker. Unfortunately, the "sad faced" Jew is close to death but his friend's local funeral parlor is not for Jews. A century later, on October 27, 2018, a gunman killed 11 people in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, apparently out of hatred for Jews. Maybe the author of Ecclesiastes had it right. "What has happened before will happen again; what has been done before will be done again: there is nothing new under the sun." (1:9)

How do we find direction in what can seem like a wasteland in the 21st century? How do we bear Christ into this our world? In the first century, did the words of John the Baptist, our Advent beacon, strike fear in the hearts of those who heard his railing in the wasteland as he pointed to Christ? As we make our way through Advent 2018, how do we respond to the reality that is ours? How do we discover Emmanuel in a world immersed in chaos?

Maybe we think that things have never been this bad. Perhaps they really are not getting worse. Rather, could it be that they are getting uncovered? What our world needs is an Extreme Makeover. But where do we start? How do we avoid repeating past mistakes? Julius Lester, author and civil rights activist, suggests that “History is not just facts and events. History is also a pain in the heart and we repeat history until we are able to make another’s pain our own.”¹ Advent offers an invitation to refocus, to re-member again, to believe that we do have the capacity to embrace the pain around us and turn it to grace.

Our Advent seeking is about perspective. We are called to maintain a different view of people and events. Contrary to Yeats’ poem, the center does hold. The person whose human birth we celebrate each December 25th focused on truth, not on what was wrong with people and events. Jesus was radical. His view started at the root of things. For example, he didn’t just see the widow dropping in two small coins (although to notice her was more than many others did), but he saw the root cause of her poverty in a society that failed to care for the widow.

When St. Francis of Assisi heard the words, “Repair my church,” he started with what seemed obvious. But then he realized that he was called to do more than repair the bricks and mortar of a tiny chapel. We, too, are called beyond what may seem obvious to tend the challenges right in front of us in our neighborhoods, church and world.

What is in front of us this Advent 2018 is admittedly chaos. Chaos is our context. So, what do we see within the chaos? Septima Clark, an educator and also a civil rights activist, offers this encouragement, “I have great belief in the fact that whenever there is chaos, it creates wonderful thinking. I consider chaos a gift.”

Dee Hock, founder and former CEO of VISA International, the credit card company, also looks at chaos as a gift. He talks about what he calls Chaordic Theory: a form of organization that is simultaneously chaotic and orderly. He credits the worldwide success of VISA with its chaordic structure. He says, “Chaordic organization is about releasing what people desire in the depth of their being—the passion they have for it—the integrity they bring to the attempt.” Hock continues, “It’s a story of harboring the four beasts that inevitably devour their keeper, ego, envy, avarice, and ambition, and a great bargain, trading ego for humility, envy for equanimity, avarice for time, and ambition for liberty...”

We have to be honest and transparent enough to own the fact that we sometimes lack integrity in how we relate with each other. It helps to recognize that the ego, envy, avarice and ambition that seem to dominate our world, and even our church, also dominate us at times. From there we seek a counter balancing order in the midst of chaos which stirs us to release the desire, the passion we have for personal integrity, humility, equanimity. Perhaps it is because I want it so much I’m reading into things; but it seems to me that many of the recent TV commercials and events like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade highlight the best in humanity. Their messages serve as counterpoint to the political rhetoric that often seems to dominate. Could there be a new order starting to materialize, even in the commercial world?

More than 20 years ago Joan Chittister, OSB, challenged religious communities to find *The Fire in These Ashes*. We have been lighting fires and today we are still stirring the ashes even as we keep stoking the bonfires that have brought and continue to bring both comfort and challenge to our church and our world. She said, "A charism is mercury, not clay; spirit, not office; a movement, not a labor force." (p. 29)

In referring to what Pope Francis calls an "open wound," sexual abuse in our church, Ron Rolheiser, OMI, says, "Carrying this crisis is now our primary ministry and not a distraction to our ministry." If we dare expand that focus, we might say that carrying the chaos of the world and church is how we as women and men religious bring our various charisms to the world and church today. Maybe that is how we uncover and bring Emmanuel to this Chaordic Age during Advent 2018.

To dare to seek Emmanuel in the midst of the chaos that grips our world and our church requires hope. Hope invites us to embrace the dignity of every human life despite those who would denigrate people and ideas they don't understand or agree with. Hope finds the very best in people, what Abraham Lincoln called our "better angels," when cultural mores and signs direct us to find fault. Even though the facts can be disheartening and the belief that things could be different seems a distant dream, hope can be found in our faith that Emmanuel really is with us.

It helps to remember that the very first words of Genesis describe chaos, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." Today our still-creating and ever-creative God is in our midst and these dark moments do not define us. Hope can be found in the midst of our ordinary days if only we dare to seek Emmanuel. This is not a call to blindness, to overlooking the painful reality in our midst. Rather, it is to see our loves and world through the eyes of faith in God-with-us and to commit ourselves to bring about the change that Mary proclaimed in her Magnificat:

*[God] knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.*
(Luke 1:52-3, from *The Message*, Eugene H. Peterson)

People of hope believe that such reversals are possible. After the devastating Civil War battle of Chancellorsville, as he had done so many times before, "Abraham Lincoln withstood the storm of defeat by replacing anguish over an unchangeable past with hope in an uncharted future."² This is the kind of human spirit that we can bring to our Chaordic Age.

Margaret Wheatley, in her book *So Far From Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World*, offers an invitation to warriorship. Typically we do not like the concept of warrior. However, warrior has a different meaning in Tibetan culture. She says, "The Tibetan word for warrior, *pawo*, means one who is brave, one who vows never to use aggression." (p. x) The weapons of this warrior are compassion and insight. Such warriors, according to

Wheatley, "... go into the corridors of power to dismantle the beliefs and behaviors that are destroying life." (p. xi) She says, "We are free to choose a new role for ourselves, to transform our grief, outrage, frustration, and exhaustion into the skills of insight and compassion, to serve the dark time as warriors for the human spirit." (p. xi)

A recent documentary on his life offers a profile of a true warrior for the human spirit. Fred Rogers, the host of a beloved children's program, "Mister Roger's Neighborhood," gave us an example of living the balance between chaos and order. While our politics and public discourse seem to have become toxic and our church searches for credibility, ordained minister Fred Rogers offers us an example of what it means to celebrate humanity, diversity, equality, compassion, decency and being neighbors to one another. In the show's first episode, the leader of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, a "benevolent monarch" named King Friday XIII, announces a plan to build a wall around his kingdom to keep out the "undesirables" and the "changers." In a later episode, Mr. Rogers is soaking his feet in a basin of cool water on a hot day. He invites Officer Clemmons, who is African-American, to join him—this at a time of segregated swimming pools in parts of the United States. "I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you," Mr. Rogers sings as they sit side by side.³

We may wonder what Mr. Rogers would have to say to us today. But more importantly, what are we going to do? How are we to be warriors for the human spirit in Advent 2018? Where is our neighborhood? Where do we seek Emmanuel in the midst of a world immersed in chaos?

First, we have to hear John the Baptist's call; but, we have to listen with Mary's heart. Mary, a human mother—a woman whose eyes could weep and heart could ache, a woman whose mouth could curve into a smile and even break into laughter; a mother whose human son could have hopes and dreams, make friends and enemies, be elated or dejected, feel pain and finally die; a son who proved that life is stronger than death. What we may begin to realize, ever so gradually, is that there is a God who chose to dwell in fragile, flawed, and fearful human flesh. Little by little it will dawn on us that there is divine life in our midst, in each one of us.

God's presence among us is not linear or chronological. It is not a point on a map. God is here and now in our midst—and oh, so easy to miss! We often find the divine in unexpected places, and this requires mindfulness. We can be so busy looking for one particular thing and miss the real thing that should have our attention. It's easy to be delighted by the splash of red sunset behind a monochromatic winter landscape. But how much attention do we give to the marvelous shapes of the trees that daily stand guard? Jesuit John Kavanaugh wrote that life is "a long parade of moments deceptively inconsequential." The journey is step by small, seemingly insignificant step. Clarissa Pinkola Estes reminds us that "ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach."

Hope and mindfulness form the compass that helps us map our journey through Advent. They may be the signposts that give us the balance we need to discover Emmanuel. It

would be easy to miss them because they are so ordinary; crowded parking lots, the spinning ball on the computer screen, even angry rhetoric can call us a greater mindfulness. God-with-us can happen in the middle of a busy day, in the midst of simple mundane activities, when experiencing tragedy or celebrating a milestone. Hope and mindfulness may even connect us to the Spirit that hovers over the chaos. They may be instruments that lead us to the compassion that is essential for healing our world and church.

Millennials are sometimes referred to as the WOKE generation. God seeks out the places in us that are deadened by apathy, selfishness, fatigue. There God coaxes us to be WOKE. When we are “woke” we are open to possibilities and we can find light in the darkness. Fred Rogers was “woke.” He taught children, and really all of us, how to create neighborhoods. Pope Francis is “woke.” He says, “In this season of Advent, we are called to enlarge the horizons of our hearts, to be surprised by the life which is presented each day with its novelty.” President George H. W. Bush was “woke” when he invited the people of the United States to recognize a Thousand Points of Light among us. St. Francis of Assisi was “woke.” He showed us how to rebuild the church. Francis also created the first nativity scene in Greccio, Italy, to help the people get in touch with the reality of Emmanuel, God-with-us. This year, as we put out our nativity scenes, perhaps we could reflect on how we want to represent Emmanuel, God-with-us. Can we be “woke” and create possibilities that bring the whole village to our nativity scenes?

It's interesting to consider nativity scenes, especially displays that come from around the world. Nativity scenes do not have to be static. They can reflect our traditions and even current social interactions. For example, the Hipster Nativity Set is controversial, but it wakes us up to our sometimes narrow vision and invites us to think about the reality of Emmanuel, God-with-us, today. Take note: Mary and Joseph taking a selfie with Baby Jesus, three wise men on Segways carrying Amazon Prime boxes, a 100% organic cow eating gluten-free feed, a shepherd snapchatting the Nativity, a sheep in a Christmas sweater and don't miss the solar powered stable.

Each Advent is an invitation to design a new nativity scene.

Who would we put in the scene?

- In place of the traditional holy family, might we have a family caught at the border in Tijuana?
- Might the shepherds be replaced by homeless people who live under bridges in our cities?
- Who are the magi?—perhaps the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis and Joan Chittister.

What unlikely people might meet at the nativity scene?

- Dr. Ford & Justice Kavanaugh,
- the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas School in Parkland, FL, and the gunman,
- President Trump and the participants in the Women's March the day following his inauguration,

- maybe even Angela Merkel, President Putin, and Kim Jung Un.

Where do we fit in the scene? Who might we each need to meet there?

Our world is immersed in chaos. But we are called to immerse the world with Emmanuel during Advent 2018. I'd like to think that the ancient apocalyptic poetry of Daniel describes our response in this, our time.

*But the wise shall shine brightly
like the splendor of the firmament,
and those who lead the many to justice
shall be like the stars forever.
(Daniel 12:3)*

Let's dare to be those points of light that uncover Emmanuel in the midst of this Chaordic Age!

¹ Julius Lester, cited in *The Invention of Wings*, Sue Monk Kidd

² *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin

³ adapted from an article by Richard Bayuk, CPPS, "Won't You Be My Neighbor," in *The New Wine Press*, November 2018