

Christmas Eve Homily  
December 24, 2016  
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

I would like to read a poem from the collection *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems (p. 45). It is entitled, "Unexpected."

*Even now we simply do not expect  
To find a deity in a stable.  
Somehow the setting is all wrong:  
The swaddling clothes too plain,  
The manger too common for the likes of a Savior,  
The straw inelegant,  
The animals, reeking and noisy,  
The whole scene too ordinary for our taste.  
And the cast of characters is no better.  
With the possible exception of the kings,  
Who among them is fit for this night?  
The shepherds? Certainly too crude,  
The carpenter too rough,  
The girl too young.  
And the baby!  
Whoever expected a baby!  
Whoever expected the advent of God in a helpless child?  
Had the Messiah arrived in the blazing light of the glory  
Of a legion of angels wielding golden swords,  
The whole world could have been conquered for Christ  
Right then and there  
And we in the church – to say nothing of the world!—  
Wouldn't have so much trouble today.  
Even now we simply do not expect  
To face the world armed with Love.*

There were two words that stand out for me in this poem, words brought to my attention recently with their correlations to other words. The first: advent. The poet asks, "Who expected the advent of God in a helpless child?" It was pointed out to me that the word "advent" is part of the word "adventure." This insight is quite apropos. The advent of God is indeed an adventure.

The season of Advent is an adventure, as we wait and seek and hope in the peace and love of God to enter into our lives and our world and put an end to suffering and injustice. As the poem says, we expect this to come in the form of blazing light and glory with powerful weapons, not a tiny baby laying amidst barn animals in their feeding trough. This is the adventure of advent, of following the path of God that leads to peace. We find it, God's peace, in the most unexpected of places.

I found it holding my friend's hand as she lay on a hospital bed slowly gliding into the MRI tube, her body being scanned by a magnetic field and radio waves for images of her cancerous breast and surrounding areas. I found it on the day I awoke in the hotel, knowing I would later say good-bye to my youngest son as we embraced another kind of advent, the adventure of starting college.

I found it when I picked up the phone and received the dreaded call that a loved one was in trouble. I found it at my front door – when a neighbor rang the bell and asked if I would teach her son piano lessons; and when a dog-rescuer handed me a stray from Bakersfield weeks after our beloved family dog had died. I found it in a gathering of friends comforting one of us who lost a child.

God doesn't show up as we expect. That is the great mystery of God, of Christmas. The adventure of advent.

When have you found the peace and love of God in an unexpected place? As we reflect upon the birth of Christ this evening, may we treasure those times, where God comes and brings light to the dark places in our lives.

The second word that stands out for me, also because it was brought to my attention as a word within a word: stable. God shows up in a stable. The poem begins, "Even now we do not expect to find a deity in a stable."

Like advent in adventure, the correlation of the word stable and stability is not insignificant: the stall or shed housing Jesus' birth being also a place that is stable in the way of being firm, unwavering, settled, secure, lasting, durable, balanced and permanent. Stable. The stable is stable.

The scandal of the gospel is that it consistently twists our ideas of how the world is meant to be. We tend to think of stability represented in bank accounts, big homes, new cars.

God showing up in a stable changes our conception of what stability looks like. God didn't need a giant bank account or a big home or a fancy, new car to make a grand entrance into the world. The stability of God is not in material things but spiritual presence. The glitter that night in Bethlehem was not of diamonds and jewels, but of a star-lit sky.

May we find stability in the simplicity of the stables in our lives – our very breath, a loving touch, a knowing glance, a caring smile, a restful and peaceful night.

As we enter into Christmas this year, let us be aware of the adventure of seeking God, and the stability that graces our lives through our faith. And may we face the world, like the baby Jesus, as the last line of the poem suggests, armed with Love.

