

The Toolbox for Advent
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Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

(Luke 1:18-20)

One of my favorite rites of passage into my adulthood was the year I bought my own toolbox. It was the year 2006 and I was heading on my first trip to Appalachia with the youth group of Glenside United Church of Christ for our mission trip with the Appalachian Service Project. We were all required to bring our own toolbox, hammer, goggles, crescent wrench, leather gloves, level, and measuring tape. We were also supposed to mark that the toolbox was ours. Most people wrote their name on their toolbox with a sharpie. I bedazzled mine with shiny gold star stickers, some of which still remain on the box to this day.

The things I love best about my tool box are: the 4 small compartments on the lid and the lift away tray on the inside, creating a first and second layer for more storage. The tools in my tool box have gotten me through some planned projects and some not so fun surprises, and yes I've added tools overtime. Mostly I simply gain comfort from knowing where my toolbox is and what's inside it.

The same is true, for me, with my Advent toolbox – especially this year, with all of the not so fun surprises. My Advent toolbox is both physical and metaphorical and each tool is important in order to help me build space in my life, my heart, and my home for Jesus. This year I need Jesus more than ever. So I invite you to join me as I unpack my Advent toolbox.

First – in those four compartments in the lid, I've got Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love and their corresponding candles. I always take those out of the toolbox first because they form the foundation of my time of waiting for Jesus. I start there, because I know I'm going to experience things this month, especially this year, that will be

difficult. But no matter how hard the bitter winter winds blow, with my foundation of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love in place, I can trust that all will be well. Even in moments of anxiety and fear, I can reach out and cling to Peace. Even in the bitter moments of feeling unworthy or unlovable, I can pull Love close to my heart. Even when I am weeping with sorrow and loss, I can hold the light of Joy. And even in those moments when I'm on the verge of despair, I can wrap myself in Hope.

Inside the toolbox, in the removable tray I pull out the Nativity, with oxen, sheep with their shepherd, three wise ones, and of course, Mary Joseph and sweet baby Jesus. On top of the Advent foundation, I place the Holy Story. This story, regardless of whether one believes that it all happened factually, as it was written in Greek, or whether one holds it as a Truth-Myth, it weaves powerful Divine magic around us. That Divine weaving invites me to a place of connection with all of space and time, and at the same time, it grounds me into the present moment.

Lifting away the removable shelf, I find that I am always surprised by

what's at the bottom of my toolbox. Even though I pull them out every year, I always forget their existence until I pick them up again and feel their energy giving me greater connection to our Triune God. Out of the bottom of the box I pull: Patience, Faith, Courage, Wonder, Gratitude, Awe, Discipleship, Praise, and Trust.

Those nine things are all found in the story of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, which we began to hear again this morning and will continue to hear through Christmas Eve. Those nine things come from the folx in the story: Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, the Angel Gabriel, the shepherds. Holding each of those things, I remember that this story isn't a fairy tale. That it is about people, like you and me, who struggled and faced hardships. And, who chose to trust in God's promises.

This leads me to the brown and well-worn envelope at the very bottom of my Advent toolbox. I lift it out gently and with reverence. Slowing and tenderly opening the envelope flap, I pull out an ancient piece of vellum, on which you can see old tear stains, even as new

ones fall fresh from my eyes as I read the brief Divine message, "Fear not."

...But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard..."

...The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God..."

...that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve God without fear,...

Each Advent, as I unpack my toolbox, I remember the infinite importance of this time of Waiting. What started, in the Fifth Century, as a way for the Christian church to try and entice people of other religious and spiritual traditions away from their winter celebrations and to follow Jesus, has become – for me at least – an annual reset of my spiritual, emotion, and mental system.

The season of Advent helps me to flush the fear from my body and to

refill with trust in God. I don't know about each of you, but I desperately need that spiritual oil change this year, more than any other, thus far.

This year, I am adding a new thing to my Advent Toolbox. Though it was meant as a lesson in trust for Zachariah, I am finding my own body, heart, soul, and mind craving the quiet from my own voice – so that I can hear God's voice more clearly; knowing that there are lessons in the silence.

My own grief about the needed changes to this season surfaced the day before Thanksgiving, and I imagine they will be with me through Epiphany. And I have committed to getting quiet, so that I can hear and acknowledge the different levels of sorrow as they arise. I am committed to this, because I can feel the wonder and awe float to the top along with the sorrow and grief.

In closing, I want to note that in my Advent toolbox you won't find a sign that says, "You need to smile and be happy, otherwise God will be mad at you, because it's Jesus birthday." If that sign is in your

Advent toolbox, I invite you to remove it and burn it. As I said in my Pastor's Letter for December, "Jesus doesn't need you to smile. Jesus doesn't need you to pretend to be happy. All Jesus is seeking is your presence – the kind of presence we enter into when we are holding a new born baby. This year, let us gather around the manger in our hearts, and sing soft lullabies to the Prince of Peace."

I wish us all a Blessed and Holy Advent season in which we invite God-With-Us, Emmanuel into our hearts – casting out all fear.

Amen.