

You may not know this, or maybe you do by now, but I am a Winnie-the-Pooh fan from long ago. The stories of Pooh and his friends are the stories I grew up with, and I can see Pooh characters all around me. My personal, private opinion is that everyone kind of fits into one or another of the characters created by A.A. Milne in his stories of Pooh corner. This time of year, I am especially drawn to a section from Milne's book Winnie the Pooh. Here's the part that captures me:

*Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it.*

-A.A. Milne, from Winnie The Pooh

These opening lines of the classic story of Winnie the Pooh describe how we might feel about this time of year. With Christmas approaching, there's so much to do, and maybe, like other years, we want this year to be different. This year, we will slow down, focus on what is important, and let the rest of the world swirl around us without affecting us; we will resist the temptation to spend so much time looking for the best sales; we will resist the temptation to search endlessly for just the right gifts; we will do something extra for someone who isn't able to enjoy the season; and we will spend more time in prayer and study. I don't know about you, but like Winnie the Pooh, I really do believe that there is another way, if only I could stop bumping for a moment and think of it!

The seasonal madness starts earlier and earlier, and I'm just sure the trees are going to go up after Valentine's Day one of these years.

Inside the walls church we have Advent to help us pause, to 'stop bumping' long enough to spend time on our real cause for celebration: a skilled artisan from an unknown family and small village became God-among-us in order that we might know of God's boundless love for us and to tell us that we belong to God's incredible family. Within the invitation to belong is a promise that being in the presence of Jesus brings us into a new relationship with God, an intimate relationship characterized by sacrificial love. The upcoming season is one in which our focus is not only on the child who came to be among us, nor on the man who grew from the child, but on what God is doing among us today and will do in the future. How will we stop bumping long enough to notice the Christ child among us and hear his voice?

Today is the first Sunday of the liturgical, or church year. We have begun a new set of readings for what is called Year B (there are three sets of readings). In Year B, Mark is the primary Gospel for Sundays. Regardless of what year we are in, though, the first Sunday of Advent always begins with an apocalyptic reading, something Jesus says that sounds a little scary and like the end of time is near.

These apocalyptic readings are not intended to drive fear into us. They come out of a time of chaos and deep distress and are intended to provide hope in the midst of fear. They say, yes, the Romans may be ruthless and in charge of us; yes, you may be struggling in your lives with no end in sight; and today they say to us, yes, your country may feel like a mess; yes, the climate is struggling and may be in serious trouble; yes, wars are raging; yes, so much seems without hope. BUT. But, listen to me. Pay attention because this is not all there is for your lives or for the life of the world. God will and does take cosmic action. God's Kingdom will not fail, and in fact will take over one day. Take notice or you'll miss it.

But we keep going down the stairs backwards, bumping our heads, feeling like there must be another way, but not quite knowing what to do to find it.

The church has resources. Our three-fold rule of prayer is a start. Participating in the Sunday Eucharist is balm for the soul. I once preached at a funeral of 1,000 people, for a young girl who grew up across the street from us. She died on the same day as another classmate of hers from high school in unrelated accidents. Needless to say, the whole city was reeling. The effect that participating in Holy Communion had on largely unchurched people was astonishing. As more and more people participated, what had been loud sobbing turned into a peaceful hush. Participation in the Sunday Eucharist brings peace to us even if it doesn't always look or feel dramatic. We are fed by Christ.

Praying the Daily Office, at home alone or on Facebook with your fellow parishioners is another part of the three-fold rule of prayer. The prayers are the prayers of the church universal. Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline make up our Daily Office. If you would like help learning how to use the prayer book, I'm happy to teach you as I'm sure our lay leaders are. When you pray the Daily Office, you are praying with Christians around the world who are praying for the life of the world and for God's kingdom to come. Join us weekdays in our new chapel at 5:00 PM for Evening Prayer and join Christians around the world in prayer. Hymn 24 says it so well. *We thank thee that thy church, unsleeping while earth rolls onward into light, through all the world its watch is keeping, and rests not now by day or night.* We are not alone, ever. God is always present, and we have a community of saints, living and beyond, who are with us always.

The third of the three-part rule of prayer is our own private devotions and prayers. There are myriad ways we can pray and study both Scripture and other spiritual readings. We read Scripture to be reminded that we are part of an unfolding drama of God's making and that God will have the final say. We read other spiritual readings to grow in our faith. The Advent Meditation booklet is one way you may want to spend time daily with scripture and spiritual readings during this season. Spending time with God, alone, either pouring out your heart to God or sitting in silence and simply letting God love you, personal prayer and devotions help us pay attention to God's presence in our individual lives.

These three ways of prayer – the backbone of the church and our individual lives – help us pay attention. They give us a way to stop bumping down the stairs and listen with

eyes, ears, heart and soul to the voice of God, and thereby live with hope instead of fear.

Throughout my priesthood there has been one crisis after another in the world and in communities in which I've served. Each crisis feels new and worse than the last. More shootings, greater numbers of people killed, division in our nation, wars, economic calamity and all the rest. Too many rewrites of sermons to include what happened the night before. Here's the thing. None of it is new. It's all been here before and will likely continue. But none of it, none of it, will have the final world. That's Jesus's message time and again and the way we kick off Advent every year. Our hope is found in God and nothing else.

Advent is a little over 4 weeks long. Participate as much as possible in this church season. Look for light in the darkness, it's here. And join the Church universal as we pray for God's Kingdom to come. Amen.