



## A TIME OF WAITING AND HOPING

An Advent mantra. A poet's search for hope in the midst of civil chaos. A child's first night of war.



We have come to the end of the first week of what I've always known as "Advent." We are already celebrating the Jewish days of Chanukah with their wonderful stories. And here at Starcross, we joined our Dutch and European friends in the celebration of the joyful Eve of St. Nicholas on Wednesday. But I would like to take time to reflect on the ordinary days that come at this pre-Christmas season of the year.



Last Saturday our five-year-old Damien began Advent in the chapel by lighting the first of four candles, while the rest of us sang a traditional chant that centered around a very

strange word.

“Maranatha” is in the ancient Aramaic language, which was used in ordinary conversations at the time of Jesus of Nazareth and had been for many centuries. It is actually probably two words: “Mara” and “Natha.” The meaning of the words is pretty much left up to the person using them. Christians usually translate them as “Come, O Lord” or something similar. However, based on the teachings of John Cassian (360–435), a monk who was an important bridge between Eastern and Western Christian monasticism, the words themselves were an essential prayer similar to a Buddhist mantra. He taught that we should not think about the meaning of the word nor visualize images in our meditation. The sounds of the words would simply guide us along the spiritual path.

During Advent I do what I'm sure others are doing as well. Breathing in deeply, I say or contemplate the sound “Mara” and breathing out slowly I do the same with “Natha.” Somehow in the process, there flies through a little meditation bird whispering “Don't be anxious” or “May your friend be well” or “Peace” or any number of things. I suppose this is how prayer and meditation combine. Sometimes there is just a blessed and deep silence. At other rarer times there is simply a touching with something sacred.

What more can I say — try it. You may like it.



T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) was a distinguished poet. He was born in St. Louis but went over to England around the time of World War I and proceeded to become more English than the English! He was raised as a Unitarian but converted to the Church Of England in the 1920s. One of Eliot's last poems was called *Little Gidding* and within it there is quite a tale.

There was a great religious civil war in England between Puritans led by Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) and Catholic-leaning others. It ended with the execution of King Charles I in January 1649. During those times, practices associated with Catholics were very suspect. People inclined in that direction had to proceed with great care. Near Cambridge, at the hamlet of Little Gidding, was a community of Anglican people interested in a common and

simple life and practicing a contemplative spirituality. This was a dangerous path but the people at Little Gidding maneuvered it well and led admirable lives for a number of years.

The experiment of Little Gidding had been long finished when Eliot heard about it, but something about it appealed to him as a spirituality standing outside of time. His *Little Gidding* poem, which is part of his *Four Quartets*, was published in 1942 as the world was coming apart due to World War II. The poem contains this disquieting line:

*For last year's words belong to last year's language /and next year's words await another voice.*

For comfort in such uncertain times, not unlike our own, Eliot reached back to the remarkable English mystic Julian of Norwich (1342–1416) who wrote, as Eliot arranged it: *Sin is Behovely, but / All shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well.*

Julian's trust was hard to believe then and it is hard to believe now. Many wondered, in Eliot's day, if that might be the last Christmas as they had known it. I feel some of that concern now. The United States is not as of yet facing war, as England was when Eliot wrote. But I personally sense that commercialism is overshadowing the simplicity that I value so much in these winter days. The future will unfold as it always does. But there certainly is a sense of uncertainty in our world at present.

Eliot's poem leads us to meditate our individual duties in a world filled with human suffering. There is a perennial need for such reflection. Many consider *Little Gidding* to be Eliot's finest poem. Through the years other poets have found Eliot to be too academic and many years after his death the feeling grew that there was an anti-Semitic tilt to his life and work. That is sad. However there are four lines toward the end of this poem that seem to be indelibly etched on my soul. The whole poem



relates to his own and our searching. For what? Perhaps the meaning of life or simply the place where we fit into the picture of existence. This is what he wrote,

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

In this season it is easy to walk that path with Eliot around our little chapel. The great trees which were flaming torches of red and gold and brown a short time ago, are now bare. And as others have observed, you can see the tree for what it is — what it really is. I think the same can be said of my soul, psyche, spirit. Perhaps it is only my advanced age, but I definitely believe I am arriving at where I started and hopefully this time I will know it.



Something happened on this date, December 7, 1941. I was 10 years old, and trying to comprehend the facts of war. A change had happened in my world within the past 24 hours. Already my father had volunteered as a civilian Air Raid Warden and would travel the neighborhood making sure that lights did not show out of the houses at night. I heard on the radio that many people had died at Pearl Harbor. I had encountered death but never on that scale. What did all this mean? There is one thing I remember most clearly. The house we rented was just across from the public high school. There was to be a Christmas program that evening. I was looking forward to it. It was canceled.

I wondered how many other things would also be canceled by war? For many years I have pondered the same question and have yet to find an answer.



My friend Lisa Jarnot, is a poet, a mother, and a spiritual minister. Some years ago Lisa knitted 100 memorial caps. She gave me one of them. My cap was knitted in memory of Khalid, a 14-year-old Afghan boy. He was one of nine young boys gathering firewood who were shot and killed by United States soldiers in helicopters in February, 2011. The boys were from a small, very poor village in a remote valley of the Kunar Province in

Afghanistan. Khalid was in the sixth grade and worked as the sole provider for his family of 13 sisters and two mothers.

I wear this cap each Advent. It keeps my head warm and it is in some way a partial answer to the question I asked about war 77 years ago when I was 10 years old.

*Brother Toby*