

The First Sunday of Advent, 2014.

Nigel Taber-Hamilton

It begins again – this sacred journey of exploration and discovery, this renewed expedition into the unknown and the hoped for, this quest for an authentic awakening and reawakening of faith.

It's a difficult journey to begin, because it requires that we loosen our hold on the reality we think we inhabit, with its hard edges and harsh attitudes, and – simply – let go; let go of the things we think we know so that, the now-empty space within us can be filled with the richness of another kingdom.

It's hard to begin that letting-go, that journey into the cloud of unknowing, given both the deafening and the subliminal noise that constantly intrudes at this time of year, the sirens' enticing songs calling us into the dangerous shallows of secular culture, even onto the sharp rocks of our consumer world. "Buy this," "read that" – "here is the answer to all your problems." Here, they claim, is all the truth you'll ever need.....but will it set you free? Not, most now seem to say, if it has anything to do with religion! More than 50 years ago, C.S. Lewis repeated something his brother overheard on a London bus as it passed a church with a creche display outside it. "[Good grief!] she said, " They bring religion into everything. Look- [now] they're even dragging it into Christmas!"

Amid our world's deafening noise, amid the overflow of cheap answers to complex questions, there *are* voices that speak Truth. We can hear them in the example of the teachers and sages of the past and present, no matter the source of their insight. To draw on the teachings of the Buddha, or of Mohammed, or of Aquinas, or Hildegard, or Julian, or Freud, or Rohr is to tap into the centuries of human wisdom that we inherit by nature of our humanity.

Those healthier voices are a part of the greater whole, they're the different melodies through which the truth of God is being expressed in one essential harmony. For us as Christians that harmony is heard most clearly in the life of Jesus, and in our reflections on our common experience in the light of his life.

In these shards of wisdom, and in the One about whom they so often speak, we find some of the maps that can guide us to new places on our faith journeys.

Maps come with legends – legends help interpret what we see before us. I find it fascinating that the word "legend" is used in this way, because the other way is as valuable and true: the great stories that tell us who we are.

Do you want to look at that map? Do you want to understand its legend? When we walk in the ways of God we find this map is pregnant with possibilities, that it's a guide

leading us to a new, breath-taking place.

But the greatest discoveries don't lie at the end of the journey, they happen along the way, discoveries like these:

- No one can travel this path of discovery on our behalf. No one can substitute for us in our own quest for the awakening grace of God.
- On the other hand, we don't make this journey alone, we make it together.
- We make it together not only supported by each other, but by all of our brothers and sisters who have gone before us.
- We make it sustained by God's gifts to us: love, and joy, and peace and community.

Thus, while our stories reveal our own paths, they differ only superficially from the stories of all of us. There is no one who doesn't share our yearning for freedom from those things that oppress us, from fear and from pain, and from sadness. Grief is grief, no matter the heart that endures it. Peace is peace, regardless of the heart that rejoices in it. Love is love no matter the heart that basks in it.

As I reflected on this season of Advent last week it seemed to me that we live our whole lives in Advent-like expectation: we're continually waiting to become, to discover, to complete, to fulfill. Hope, struggle, fear, expectation and fulfillment aren't confined to a few short weeks in the dark days of the year, they are our lives.

In this season we're reminded that the world is not as just, not as loving, not as whole as we know it can be, as we know it should be, and as we all want it to be.

And as we look back over the long arc of history we're also reminded by this season that there *is* reason to live in hope: we're reminded as we journey that all life is holy, including the parts that bend and break; that light will shatter the darkness; that we can be liberated from our fears and prejudices; that we are never alone or abandoned.

Soon - after this hour or so seeking a lush communal encounter with Grace - we'll return to the harsh, barren deserts of our dried-up world.

But not alone, not without the supportive provisions that God can supply, not without the well-wishes of our fellow pilgrims, not without the promise of a new day and a renewed spirit.

And so again we journey on together, always questing for an encounter with the great Divine Mystery, fellow-students in the preschool of infinity, as we walk hand-in-hand to the great moment of birth.