

Advent 4, December 23, 2012. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland, WA
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I remember it like it was yesterday – though actually it was over 20 years ago. “It” was a moment that still hangs suspended in time for me, as if I could turn around and be back in Indiana, on that cold, snowy winter day.

I had just made my way across Bloomington from my office to a friend's house – he was hosting an Advent Party – which tells you that this was someone who took Advent seriously! Well, took remembering that Advent-is-not-Christmas seriously; which is not the same thing as “being serious” before a celebration! David was a good Episcopalian – which meant he knew how to have fun!

And we were just a few days before that religious celebration – “the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ”. Still, for most attendees the season for celebration had firmly come!

Unusually, there was snow on the ground – the southern Indiana of my memory often got some snow in winter, but it always seemed to happen after Christmas – in January and February, not late December.

This year was different – about 4" had accumulated over the previous two days and the temperature was a steady 30F, which meant it was still mostly white, and not at all slushy.

The Worthies of Bloomington had for many years valued being known as “Tree City USA” – though you could as easily have said “hedge city” – in the old part of town people cared for their yards, and valued what privacy they could create. And so it was a veritable “winter wonderland” – snow covered trees, bushes, hedges, with narrow pathways dug down each sidewalk for those willing to walk.

I reached David's house and parked “close enough” to the curb. I still have a vivid memory of walking up the winding pathway to his front door in the deepening twilight – it was a moment of such sharp clarity that I can still hear the crunch of snow and feel the occasional snow flake on my cheek, as the growing sounds of laughter from those already inside struggled to compete.

At David's front door I stopped. My memory is that I must have stood there for a long time, though I'm guessing it was just a few moments. It was what I have later described as a “doorstep moment”; I was caught between two worlds: the quiet, darkening beauty of a white winter afternoon, and the bright, warm celebration focused on friends, and shared values, and good food!

Both those worlds had their own attraction, though each was quite different. The former was filled with quiet expectation and some real anticipation of what was to follow. The latter was a bright, noisy confrontation with celebration – no where to hide if you wanted a few moments peace!

I found myself reflecting that neither I, nor the people gathered inside, came to that moment unprepared. I had brought a gift for the host. He, in turn, had spent time getting everything ready for his guests.

Yesterday morning a group of us gathered at church to get ready for a party – one that will happen tomorrow. No snow outside, just rain, and inside the polishing of the silverware, the hanging of garlands, the putting up of a tree. So we were, in our own way, standing on a doorstep.

Today is really an extension of that preparation. Today we stand on the doorstep – and whether it's on a snowy winter evening literally standing at a door, or on a wet morning that feels a little bit out of place – given that the party happens tomorrow! – the moment is the same.

We are in that doorstep moment right now; suspended between the quiet reflection and expectation of Advent and the brash, warm celebration of Jesus' birth; each offering a gift, but requiring something of us in return.

Advent's gift is in its call to reflect not only on the meaning of this celebration, now about 36 hours away, but in so doing to invite us into that place where we take stock of our surroundings and celebrate them: the quiet (damp!) green beauty of the Pacific Northwest and Whidbey Island, the fellowship of colleagues and friends, the expectation we have felt growing for some time now.

Christmas' gift beckons; God's son, born into humanity! What a profound gift. But a gift that also asks something of us, asks for something in return:

- a deeper level of commitment?
- A more energetic engagement in our communities?

That's for tomorrow. Today is for lingering just a little longer on the doorstep; for taking in the beauties around us, and anticipating tomorrow's joy without having to think too much about consequences. Amen.