

Sermon for December 17, 2017 (Advent3B) “Troublesome Gift”

(Based on Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:1-8)

It's Advent, so of course I'm thinking about aliens. Real, live, little green outer-space aliens. Because it's Advent, and this is the Sunday of Joy. Bear with me... When I was a child, I had a recurring dream. It had several variations, but the plot was always the same: Aliens were coming! I would rush around the house, lock all the doors and try to jam the windows shut, terrified of letting these strangers in. It was a long and complicated process, full of rising panic and paralyzing anxiety. I was so deeply afraid of what they might do if I let them get close to me. And at the end of the dream, in spite of all my efforts, guess what? Every single time, they would find a way in anyway—and then they would open their hands—or whatever passed for hands, in that particular variation—and they had a gift to offer me. It was a stone, softly rounded or carved with beautiful facets, sometimes set into a necklace but usually just a stone, a warm pink stone. After all my anxious efforts, it turns out, they did come in peace, and with this beautiful gift. At the end of the dream, I would take the stone they offered, but it would melt into me, and with it came the realization that I would never be able to parade it around or show it to anyone—yet that gift would always be with me, carried in my heart.

“God loves a cheerful giver.” And we call this a season of giving, and this dear church family is so good at that. Yet the uncomfortable truth—the message of generations of prophets and angels and other otherworldly visitations—is that God is asking us also to *receive*, to take the terrifying risk of letting some strange goodness in. The gift arrives—as it always does—at the worst possible time in human history, when terror is rattling every doorjamb and scratching at every windowsill.

Rebecca Solnit makes disasters her speciality. Her book, [A Paradise Built In Hell](#), looks at the aftermath of massive earthquakes and hurricanes. She looks at the disconnect between what gets reported and what actually happens. Describing Hurricane Katrina, she writes that, while the media hyped stories of lawlessness,

violence, and criminal disregard, the residents of New Orleans she interviewed told the story very differently:

...from the very minute it all began, there was tremendous altruism. The first round of rescuers were people who were themselves inside the city who got boats or did other things to rescue people, who came together in buildings that weren't damaged and formed little communities and took care of the vulnerable. But there are these extraordinary stories. ...that impulse to help is so powerful...they call it “disaster convergence,” and it often becomes a problem... after 9/11, people lined up around the block all over the country, to give blood. People really want to help. That's who we are.

And New Orleans, for years afterwards, had all these people — church groups, and I saw amazing Mennonite builders rebuilding houses, and Habitat for Humanity, and I kind of loved it. It was the whole spectrum, from Catholic Charities to the Mennonites to pretty radical anarchists. And people working with Common Ground, which was founded by the Black Panthers and young white supporters and became a project that did a lot of different things, and not all of it worked out perfectly, but some of it was amazing, and it became really a part of the conversation. But they founded the first really good clinic for people who needed emergency care, who needed their diabetes medicine or their tetanus shot or their wound disinfected. And that split off into Common Ground Clinic, which is still going strong more than ten years later. And that's the kind of indirect consequences that I find so interesting to trace, is that here's something that came out of Katrina that's still helping people every day.

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, was also shaped by disaster—for her, it was the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906. When it happened, she was eight years old. And she saw how, as a city fell apart, the people fell together. And the joy of helping others—the intangible gift that illuminated her life and brought hope to the shattered—that joy guided her and grounded her. It became a spiritual

discipline, a daily exercise of re-opening and marvelling at God's wonderful gift. She referred to this discipline as “the Duty of Delight.”

The Duty of Delight. Yes, that's the awful truth of Joy. This is the thing I spent so much energy dreading—that I might be drawn into this distressing consequence, for which I was unprepared!

The Source of Life and Love, the Maker of the Universe, is reaching out to offer us something. And here's the worst of it: none of our carefully-crafted rules of gift-giving and receiving apply. You can hesitate all you want—God's used to that. You can wonder, what's the catch? You can spend your days and nights dancing around the edges, inspecting it for possible strings attached, worried about how it will obligate you, alter your status, bind you into some distressing social contract to which you might not live up. God's used to those suspicions—and God's still reaching out, gift in hand.

You can worry how you should use it, and where it should be displayed, and what on earth you should say in your thank-you note. You can use all these worries to distract yourself from the fact that God's standing in your doorway, smiling with love in her eyes, bearing a gift—a gift that is mostly invisible, once it is given, a gift that can melt into your heart and become a part of you.

You can come up with a thousand reasons not to accept it. Or you can open your door, open your hand, open your life and say yes: I will stand in these ruins, in this earthquake, in this flood, in this alien Advent invasion. And I will receive this gift, regardless of my awkwardness and fear. Like Mary, like Joseph, like John and Elizabeth, I will witness to the light and bear the burden of Joy.

--Preached by Rev. Holly S. Morrison

Phippsburg Congregational Church, UCC, Phippsburg, Maine

Source Notes: Rebecca Solnit quote from OnBeing interview with Krista Tippett, originally broadcast May 26, 2016. <https://onbeing.org/programs/rebecca-solnit-falling-together/>