

By Turning, Turning, We Come 'Round Right

Most of us are aware that as we begin this season of Advent, we begin a new year, a new cycle in our liturgical observance. We begin to tell the story of God's action in our history by turning back to promises of old, promises fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

This new cycle is one of many we experience in the course of our lives – new calendar years, new academic years, new budget years, new years marked by birthdays and anniversaries. Each of these cycles causes us to look back as well as forward. Back to assess where we have been, to understand the meaning of our life experiences. And forward with hope that our past learning will enable us to grow into more faithful people. It was perhaps this wisdom that caused the ancient Romans to invoke their god Janus, depicted with two faces, one facing forward, the other back, at times of transitions and new beginnings.

The scripture selection for the first Sunday of Advent, from the prophet Isaiah, recognizes a need for something new. The prophet sees that things are not as they should be. God appears to be distant and people have chosen a path for themselves that is not life giving. "Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways!" Isaiah exclaims. He sees himself on the threshold of new possibilities.

Let us put ourselves in Isaiah's place for a moment. Where is the tension in our lives right now that fuels a need for change? Is it in our health ministry, our work place, our personal lives? Does this tension place us on the threshold of something new? Do we risk falling backward by not embracing this moment? Can we cross this threshold with the confidence expressed by Isaiah as he wrote, "No ear has ever heard, no eye has ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for him."

The old Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" offers a clue and hope that if we just make the first move and continue to move with confidence, we will end up in the place we ought to be.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.