



## December 2011 Reflections

December has arrived and with it the season of advent waiting. As usual at this time of the year we are surrounded by sights sounds and smells of Christmas rather than advent. It can be difficult to enter into a Holy Advent when everywhere we look we are urged to enter the “Christmas Spirit” almost as soon as Halloween has passed.

Rupp, in her December reflection, invites us to enter Advent with a sense of exile, a term not often used in the advent time of anticipatory waiting, yet a term that fully fits and demands attention.

Not many of us in Manotick United Church, know what it is to be a refugee, not many of us in the western world know what it feels like to be exiled from our home. This can be a very difficult image to enter and to use for reflection especially when we are surrounded by the joyous sounds of Christmas. Exile is lonely and achingly sad, bleak and deeply mournful.

Rupp, calls upon the lectionary readings for this time of year taken from the prophets of ancient Israel at a time when the nation was in exile, Jerusalem was in ruins, Zion, the place where it was believed that God resided was no more, the temple destroyed. Can you imagine the desolation, aching loss and mournful lamentations. I think we can get a glimpse of it when we look into the eyes of someone who is experiencing exile from their home country because of war or famine. Images we see too often on our television screen, children’s eye’s mother’s faces and men’s hopelessness all visible in a photograph. All that is familiar and comforting has been destroyed, taken away and perhaps it feels as if life has lost its colour and meaning. All around things are strange.

The closest I can personally relate to this feeling of being an alien in a strange land is by my own experience of immigration. Arriving in Quebec in July twenty-two years ago, I remember the different sounds and the strangeness of everything, the overwhelming heat and humidity was like a wall of unfamiliarity. I was surrounded by people speaking a language I did not know. I felt that I looked “different”. I certainly know that I sounded different and so did not “fit in”. Something we all want to do, is “fit in”.

In our faith tradition, we are not called to “fit in”. We are reminded again and again, that our lives are lives of exile, of journey - like Bedouins in the desert or the Israelites in the exodus seeking the Promised Land. Our lives are lived in advent or exile seeking the kingdom of God. In many respects as Rupp reminds us, we must be wary of “fitting in” with the culture. She offers us some “warning signs” such as questioning our major focus as Christmas draws near. She also offers signpost of faithfulness to our faith. As the Israelites tried to remain faithful to their faith in exile in Babylon, tried not to be overwhelmed and remain distinctive to who they were, we too must remain distinct from the culture that surrounds us. I have become accustomed to Canadian lifestyle, however I have also retained my accent, I am different, and proud of my difference my heritage. I think perhaps that is in some measure that is what Rupp means. It is not easy living in exile.

Rupp encourages us to reflect upon the places in our lives where we are experiencing exile, spiritual or psychological, preventing us from being at home in our true selves. She also asks, “who do we, in our churches send into exile,” making them feel unwelcome at the table. (Rupp, 157.) Not only do we experience exile in our lives, but so do those around us. Rupp encourages us to open our eyes and hearts to the plight of those in exile, those who are unwelcome, homeless, or refugees such as our Lord Jesus was at his birth and in his early years. He was born in a stable because there was no room at the inn and forced to flee to Egypt because of the threat of death. Rupp also asks us to consider the ways we do nothing to change the systems of oppression and exclusion, because in these moments and times we are Babylon, not a faithful people in exile trying to live in the way of the one who came bringing love, peace and justice and who walked a life of forgiveness and peace, who taught about the kingdom of heaven, a place where God’s justice prevails.

For many, that image of God’s kingdom or heaven summons up life hereafter. Rupp reminds us that God’s kingdom is a kingdom of justice in this world, not the hereafter. It would be so much easier if we could just focus on the world to come, not this one. Life would be so much simpler, but that is not our calling. Our calling is working towards God’s kingdom. In fact it is to live as though we were living in God’s kingdom of justice realized. And that means caring about the people around us.

Advent leads us into Christmas and we can very easily get caught up in the sentimentality of celebrating a baby’s birth. Rupp writes “it is a time to reclaim what we have lost in our hearts” (Rupp 160). She further writes; “advent focuses on our place in exile and whether or not the savior whose birth we celebrate has made a difference in our lives”, doing this can only mean that we work and live in the kingdom to come already here.

Advent is a time of prayerful anticipation. It is a time of action and waiting. It is a time of darkness and light, soft pools of candlelight flickering against a dark sky showing us the way home through the one called the light of the world.

**May your homes and lives be blessed by an exiled living through a Holy Advent,  
And may Christmas arrive in your heart each day of the year..**