

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**November 29, 2009**  
**1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**  
**Luke 21:25-36**

**“Stand Up and Raise Your Heads”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Years ago I saw a videotape of Audre Lorde giving a keynote address at a conference. I remember that she spoke about women’s place and rights in the world and about women’s dignity and pride, and that she spoke particularly forcefully about the pride of African American women. And I vividly remember that at one point during her speech she began to cry....at first she was softly weeping, then she really began to cry. The audience was hushed.

Audre Lorde remained at the podium while she cried. Then suddenly another speaker or a conference organizer or someone, I don’t know who she was, a Black woman appeared from the wings and went up to Audre Lorde and stood at her side, facing her (perpendicular to the audience). The woman seemed to appear out of nowhere—she just walked up to the podium and stood facing Audre Lorde. The woman stood there witnessing to Audre Lorde’s depth of emotion and tears. The woman did not hand Audre Lorde Kleenex, she did not rub her back, she did not hug or touch her, she did not speak to her. She stood perfectly still at Audre Lorde’s side, facing her, witnessing to Audre’s depth of feeling.

After a few minutes, Audre Lorde stopped crying and continued her speech. She never mentioned what had just happened, she did not apologize for it, explain it or refer to it. She went on. And the Black woman who had been standing at her side disappeared as mysteriously as she had appeared.

I am telling you this story today, on the first Sunday in Advent to tell you, to warn you really, that that Black woman who witnessed on the stage next to Audre Lorde is an image I want you to hold and to aspire to during Advent.

I can explain.

Immanuel, God with us, is coming. Advent in a time of waiting and preparing.

Immanuel, God with us, is coming.

And I want you to be ready—emotionally, spiritually, physically, intellectually.

I want you to be ready for this big event.

Something important is about to happen. Something life-changing, world-changing is about to occur and I want you to be ready.

I want you to be able to witness this event with all your clarity and strength.

I want you to bring to the birth of Jesus—this remarkable, transforming event—your best, purest, strongest, clearest, most spiritual, most grounded and most open self.

I want you to approach Christmas standing tall, a witness to this event like the woman who appeared next to Audre Lorde at the conference: alert, ready to act, clear, self-possessed, aware, and totally present.

So get ready.

This is day #1—you are now in training.

I know that New Year's Day is usually the day we make resolutions and start on a path of self-improvement like not indulging in so many treats and not doing this or doing more of that.

Well Advent IS the beginning of a New Year...the new liturgical year. So we are not going to wait until January 1<sup>st</sup> to make those resolutions, those changes, we are going to make them now.

To put it bluntly: I want you to clean up your act so you can prepare fully, with reverence, for the coming of the Christ child.

And speaking of New Year's resolutions, I am not interested in having your Advent resolutions sound like the usual litany you make on January 1<sup>st</sup> every year.

Those resolutions are what I call the "I wannas...."

I wanna lose weight.

I wanna work out more.

I wanna spend more time at the gym.

I wanna give up sugar.

I wanna tone my muscles.

I wanna....

I am not interested in the I wannas.

This Advent, as you and I prepare for the coming of the Christ child, as we pledge to bring our strongest, clearest, most spiritual, and most faithful selves to that life-changing event, our resolutions start with I WILL. Like...

I will spend more time in prayer this month.

I will devote more hours to volunteer service this month.

I will give away more money this month.

I will minimize the rushing around and avoid over-shopping.

The “I WILLS” as opposed to the “I Wannas” will help prepare us to rise on Christmas clear, refreshed and spiritually centered and greet the day with the awe, delight and reverence Christmas Day deserves.

Be warned, my precious sisters and brothers: preparing for the coming of the Christ Child on the emotional, spiritual, physical and intellectual levels will not be easy.

Not only will it take time, work and discipline, but it will mean resisting the almost unbearable pressure to conform to what everyone else around you is doing....what society seems to expect of us at this time of the year. There is real pressure to eat too much, drink too much, shop too much, use drugs too much, and spend too much. All the messages we receive on TV, in the stores, at the mall, at holiday parties, with friends and family will be: indulge, go crazy, toss caution to the wind, live it up, enter into the holiday blur, stupor, haze, craze. You'll sort it out later. The mood and the messages will be: it is okay even expected even desirable to be undisciplined and eat, drink, shop, spend, drive, and watch TV from Thanksgiving until New Year's Day so that you live inside a kind of five week Holiday Hangover.

But the message in Scripture is just the opposite.

The message in Scripture is: prepare yourself for the coming of Immanuel, God with us. In truth, Advent is like a “little Lent.” The message during both Advent and Lent is: prepare, get ready, something important is coming.

And so I say to you: put down the bottle, Immanuel is coming.

Put down the fork, Immanuel is coming.

Put down the remote, Immanuel is coming.

Put down the drugs, Immanuel is coming.

Put down the credit card, Immanuel is coming.

The woman who stood by Audre Lorde was able to leap up and come stand next to Audre when she was needed, she was able to witness Audre's pain, absorb Audre's

feelings, hold the tension in the room, stand there strong and silent because she was clear and present to what was happening around her. She was attuned, she was ready, she had prepared herself somehow to be able to respond like that in an instant because she was alert, clear, centered, strong and present.

I want you to be her this Advent.

I want you to be strong, clear and present like she was because I fear the alternative is that you succumb to the messages all around you this Advent Season to over-indulge in every possible way, numb out, space out, and flake out. And if you do, you will just skid past Christmas completely.

You will be like those Northwest Airline pilots who were so out of it they flew 150 miles past the city where they were supposed to land.

They just went right past their destination, too spaced out to land a plane full of passengers. They were so self-absorbed they totally missed the mark.

Sadly, the commercialization of Christmas and the over-indulgences that have become part of the season can seduce us into doing the same thing. We can, just like those pilots, have our head in the clouds and fly right past Christmas. Then we'll land sometime in January and wonder why the holidays went by so quickly, or turned out so badly.

In the early 1980s, I went to a workshop in Northampton led by some self-help guru who I now forget. What I do remember clearly is that when the workshop began, the leader handed out a questionnaire. We were to answer the questions and then get in groups of four to discuss our answers. I remember, all these years later, one question that jumped off the page at me. The question was simply:

“What are your addictions?”

The question was not: do you have any addiction? If yes, list them.

Or: are you struggling with any addictions. If yes, what are they?

No.

The question was: “What are your addictions?”

It made for a real and fruitful discussion in my small group.

It is a good question for us to ask ourselves on this FIRST Sunday in Advent when we are making some resolutions that have spiritual meaning and are not the “I wannas.” Ask yourself the question: what are my addictions? And then decide you will not succumb to them or indulge them this Advent because you are preparing yourself to be your clearest, purest, finest, cleanest, strongest self to welcome the Christ Child.

The 4<sup>th</sup> step in the 12 Steps of AA reads as follows:

“We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”

This Advent, which remember is called a “little Lent,” is a fine time to make a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves and then commit to make the thoughtful and careful changes that will clean up and clear out our systems to let something new and wonderful arrive. It is a good time for a searching inventory that helps us empty ourselves to make room for a newcomer in the family.

Our Scripture readings for today sound like a combination of the preparations for both Advent AND Lent. Listen:

*People...will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory.  
Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads,  
because your redemption is drawing near.’  
Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and  
drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you  
unexpectedly...Be alert at all times.*

Notice the “be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness...” that is the NRSV wording. Other translations of the Bible say “take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be overcharged with debauchery and drunkenness...”

And still others say “be careful not to let yourselves become occupied with too much feasting and drinking...”

They all apply. And they all mean:

Don’t overindulge so that you go through this precious season anesthetized.

Stand up and raise your heads, the Scripture says.

Stand up and see what lies ahead.

This is no small event...Immanuel, God with us, is coming.

If we want to feel it, absorb it, witness to it, savor it, be present to it, plumb the deepest meaning of the coming of the Christ child, we need be disciplined and prepare. Stand up and raise your heads.

In 1 Thessalonians Chapter 3 we hear, “Strengthen your hearts in holiness.”

Strengthen your hearts in holiness—that’s our goal this Advent.

We don’t need all the eggnog and alcohol, all the gift wrapping and mince meat pie, all the jockeying for a parking space at the mall, and maxing out our credit cards.

We don't need all the exhaustion and stress that crowds out the wonder and joy.

What we do need is to strengthen our hearts in holiness...

What we do need is to stand up and raise our heads...

What we do need is to wait and prepare during this "little Lent."

What we do need is to take to heart the words of that old chestnut of an Advent hymn we sang earlier in the service,

*Lift up your heads, O mighty gates, behold the glorious Ruler Waits!  
The Sovereign One is drawing near; the Savior of the world is here.  
Fling wide the portals of your heart; make it a temple, set apart  
from earthly use for heaven's employ, adored with prayer and love and joy.  
Redeemer, come! We open wide our hearts to you; here, Christ, abide!  
Let us your inner presence feel, your grace and love in us reveal.  
So come, our Sovereign; enter in! Let new and nobler life begin;  
Your Holy Spirit guide us on, until the glorious crown be won.*

This Advent, be like the woman at the Audre Lorde conference: quick and clear, grounded and alert, ready and present.

This Advent...be counter-cultural.

Take the season seriously.

Think about what lies ahead.

Shop less and sing more.

Be spiritually rooted.

Stay sober and calm.

Fast and pray.

This Advent...

Put down the catalogues.

Pick up the Bible.

Because...

Immanuel, God with us, is coming.

Amen.