

2023 Advent 1B

One very cold December day, thirty-odd years ago, when I was a student in Moscow in what was then the USSR, my friend Molly and I were out walking in the vicinity of Red Square. We were deep in discussion about something—I honestly don't remember what—and at one point we stopped in a sunny spot next to a building to try to warm up a little.

We were entirely focused on our conversation, so it took us a while to realize what was happening behind us.

Something you need to understand about life in that place at that time. You celebrated what you could get. One time as I waited for my turn to approach the counter in the bakery, a woman shared with me that she approved of Gorbachev's new economic policies because instead of being able to find milk *OR* bread, now she could regularly find milk *AND* bread.

There was very little advertising because there was rarely anything to advertise. The idea of having to choose between brands was an entirely foreign concept to them. You don't realize just how much pressure advertising puts on us until you've lived away from it for a while. (One of my culture-shock moments upon my return was feeling overwhelmed by all the colorful packaging in the laundry detergent aisle. I remember

holding up a box and saying to my sister, “It’s so BEAUTIFUL!” I’m pretty sure she thought I’d lost my mind.)

Instead of TV commercials or newspaper inserts, people found out what was available by word of mouth. If something came into stock, the news would get around and people would show up at the store, waiting in a line to be allowed in to shop, which was a complicated procedure of repeatedly waiting in lines.

So if you were walking down the street and saw a line outside a store, you joined it, in case it was something really exciting and rare. Once I was unbelievably excited to join a line early enough to find new slippers in my size, because usually I didn’t find out until long after all the ones that would fit my big feet had been snapped up.

As hard as it was to live in that system, there was also something about it that fostered a kind of openness to joy. You never knew what unexpected treasure might be just around the corner. You spent so much time in lines that some of the best conversations you had were with complete strangers waiting alongside you.

So there we stood, Molly and I, solving the problems of the world as only two 20 year olds can, only to discover as we looked up, that a line had formed behind us.

We were standing against the wall of a household goods store.

People had seen us as the beginning of a line, and assumed we had some inside knowledge about something really excellent about to go on sale, and queued up behind us.

Picture two young American women trying to slink off, hoping to be far away before the old Russian grandmothers behind us realized they had just spent ten minutes waiting for nothing.

I sometimes tell myself that perhaps they knew something we didn't, and were happy to see the line shorten by two people before they even stepped foot inside. Or maybe we served as a sign for something good without even knowing it, and because those little Russian grandmothers, wrapped up in their colorful head scarves, took the time to stop and wait in the cold, they were blessed in ways they otherwise would not have been.

Today begins the season of Advent, that short season that begins our church year. We have a brand new calendar wheel for our kids, we have the Advent wreath out with its candles, three blue and one pink, (plus that center white one for Christmas, but let's not rush

things!) We sing “Come, thou long-expected Jesus,” “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” “The king shall come when morning dawns,” “People look east...”

It is a season of expectant waiting and watching, a time of preparation.

But for what?

For Christmas, remembering and celebrating the birth of a baby 2000 years ago?

For some future dramatic entrance of the Son of Man, descending from clouds and setting all things right?

Do we know what it is we are waiting for, watching for?

And how much do we miss because we assume we know what’s coming?

How many times have we missed Jesus in our midst because we were too busy looking to the heavens waiting for a dramatic entrance?

On the other hand, how many times have we been so content with the Jesus we have that we have dozed off, stopped waiting and watching for evidence of the kingdom of God breaking in?

Advent is a time to be open to all the possibilities of this already/not yet time we live in. To celebrate the things that have already happened, and to prepare for the good things yet to come. To look back with joy and gratitude for all that God has done, and to look forward with active patience and hope that God still has surprises for us.

I invite you, this Advent, to embrace your inner Russian granny. Continue waiting and watching for Jesus to appear in all the ways you expect, be it baby in the manger or Son of Man descending on the clouds.

But also be willing to slow down, notice the signs that something exciting but unknown might be about to appear. Take the time to step out of the busy-ness, to wait and watch for some moment of blessing you didn't even know was possible.

You might even find you, yourself, have become a welcome sign of Emmanuel, God-with-Us, to someone who needs a glimmer of hope.

Amen.