

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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III Advent, Luke 3:7-18

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

We have reached that time of year when Spotifyⁱ recounts how many hours we've spent listening to a particular song and when our Fitbit reports how many steps we've taken; when television networks assemble slide shows of the famous dead and newspapers rank the biggest stories of our most recent trip around the sun. While this technological and cultural milestone-ing intends to direct our attention to the grains passing through The Great Hourglass, I continue to experience pandemic time as a cosmic accordion, these last 22 months existing as both a blink and an eternity, all of us living under the creases of an Al Jaffee fold-in from the back cover of a *Mad* magazine.ⁱⁱ Yet the world still turns – *has* turned, *is* turning – and we very much with it.

As another strategy to realize time's passage, teleport, if you will, to December 20, 2020 – almost exactly one year ago – and recall that Donald Trump remained President and insurrections the madness of less civilized realms ... recall that no COVID-19 vaccine was publicly available and we at Trinity Church were readying for a Christmas Eve of "Worship from Home." Somehow, the *idea* of last December feels like yesterday, but the particulars of those circumstances already seem an ocean ago.

Into that strange moment, President-Elect Joe Biden addressed our nation:

"Before I take questions," he said, "I'd like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and happy holidays. This has been one of the toughest years we've ever faced as a nation[:] the pandemic, the economic crisis, [our labor] for racial justice, [the] historic and punishing wildfires and storms. So this [Advent] season [might carry for us] a much deeper meaning than[, perhaps,] it usually does ... [Jesuit Priest Alfred Delp] wrote, 'Advent is a time for rousing.' [He] believed, at first, we are shaken to our depths, and then we're ready for a season of hope. As a nation, we've certainly been shaken ... Now it's time to wake [up and] get moving ..."ⁱⁱⁱ

Biden could just as easily have been speaking this very weekend, addressing the Omicron variant's rise and generational inflation, the Rittenhouse verdict and the devastating Midwest tornados. Likewise, his appeal to Delp still crackles for us this year later.

A recent biography chronicles Alfred Delp, “born in Mannheim, Germany, on September 15, 1907, [the] second child of unwed parents.”^{iv} His mother was a kitchen worker and Catholic; his father an office worker and Protestant. When Alfred was seven in 1914, he, his three sisters, his two brothers, and his parents moved south of Frankfurt to “a three-bedroom apartment above a restaurant, located a few steps from the Catholic Church of St. Andreas and across the street from the Lutheran Church of St. Luke’s.”^v

Raised between those two worlds, the young Delp proved “a bright student, an avid reader, and a mischievous boy.”^{vi} At fourteen, he was confirmed in the Lutheran Church as his father required, but, “after being slapped across the face by a [pastor] for [arriving] late to a religious lesson, [Delp] left [Lutheranism] and vowed never to return.”^{vii} Heading to the congregation across the street, he soon made his First Communion and was confirmed as a Roman Catholic.

The next year, Delp entered a nearby seminary. “His classmates [there spoke] of his service, [his] cheerfulness, and, above all, his restless and keen intelligence [... his *restless* intelligence]. He enjoyed partaking in philosophical [disputations],” they explained, and he joined an idealistic Catholic youth movement – *Neudeutschland* – aiming to renew German society after World War I. Finding the footsteps of *Neudeutschland*’s founder,^{viii} he pronounced his vows and joined the Jesuit Order in 1928.

In the decade that followed, the rise of Hitler and Nazism challenged Delp’s theology. Endeavoring the consequence of the Existentialism he wrestled,^{ix} he sought a *living* faith and not merely an airy one.^x Pivoting from the academy to the parish, in 1937, he was ordained priest, and, in 1941, he was appointed Rector of St. George’s Church in Munich.

As Rector, Delp preached against the Third Reich and its horrors, and his congregation harbored their Jewish neighbors. Following the failed plot to assassinate Hitler during July of 1944, the Gestapo arrested Delp and other resisters in his Circle.^{xi} As his detention persisted into mid-winter of that year, Delp, penned encouragement and challenge to his parish. He wrote:

There is perhaps nothing we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up[, for we live] on [this] earth in an utterly false and counterfeit security ... Many of the things that are happening today would never have happened if we had been living in [the] disquiet of heart which results [from facing] with God, the Lord, and when we look clearly at things as they really are. If we had done this, God would have withheld his hand from many things that have [crushed] our lives. We would have seen the inner authorities, we would have seen and judged the limits of our own competence.^{xii}

Importantly, let us reassign to humankind “*with God’s help*” that agency Delp attributes exclusively to the Divine Hand, for God neither moved against Munich nor against us in this long year of 2021. Even so, Delp’s call for the faithful to face the ultimacy of God’s intentions – to see clearly “things as they really are” and, thereby, to “judge [more righteously and accurately] the limits of our own competence” – strikes at the very heart of *our* troubles in *this* Advent, troubles Delp faced with terrible force and immediacy.

While in Tegel Prison, Delp managed to smuggle his letters and sermons out with the laundry. In the dark before morning, the faithful remnant of the flock he tended would read his writings aloud in the rubble of the church where they once served and prayed. The season of Advent

provided Delp a framework for reading his life as a theological text and interpreting his own, interminably difficult experience as somehow – *somehow* – an affair with God’s Grace.^{xiii}

Though the German government dropped the initial charges conspiracy, the People’s Court nonetheless found Delp guilty of meeting with “others who talked about a Germany free of Hitler,” actions declared treasonous enough and meriting death by hanging. On January 11, 1945, five days after Delp celebrated an Epiphany Eucharist in his cell, Nazi leadership offered to pardon and release him if he would abandon his ordination vows and his vocation in the Church. Delp refused. He was executed on February 2, 1945.

Awaiting his fate, he wrote:

Walking up and down in my cell, three paces this way and three paces that way, with my hands in irons and ahead of me an uncertain fate, I have a new and different understanding of God’s promise of redemption and release ...

[I now see that] It is time to put things back where God the Lord [first] put them. It is time for each of us to go to work [with] the same unshakable sureness that the Lord will come[, and] to set our life in God’s order wherever we can ... We must let our inner eye see and let our hearts range far ... see[ing] Advent this year with greater intensity and anticipation than ever before. [And so, my friends,] Light your candles quietly, such candles as you possess, wherever you are.^{xiv}

During this Advent seventy-seven years later, we light candles – setting them in the windows of our homes, in decoration along our eaves, wrapped around the pillars of our Trinity Church – witnessing that we, too, still wait up for Jesus, still wait up for the hope born in us and in all the cosmos, from the beginning. And in the flicker of those modest flames – even our altar wreath, daring burn with the pink candle announcing, “Rejoice!” – we do not illumine the shadowy foreground of these pandemic days. Rather, when we “set our life in God’s order wherever we can,” our Advent lamps light a grander, more distant shore, and we bear our faith upon the Beloved future that God dreams.

Therefore, with our inner eye seeing keenly and our hearts ranging far, let us wake up! Wake up to the inadequacy of our own strength, and humbly seek the redeeming power of God’s Great Love. May that Love stir us to shake loose this pandemic’s bent time that eases us into lethargy, that undermines our agency, that presents us only as subject to this world, rather than as cocreators of our common future – whether collaborators of its wellbeing or conspirators in its suffering. And with an Advent of the heart, may we glimpse sparkles of the Divine in even the rubble of our hurts and disappointments, finding joy and deep meaning as again we await the birth of the Infant Christ.

Delp concludes:

... just beyond the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on us the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come. From afar sound the first notes as of pipes and singing boys, not yet discernable as a song or melody. It is all far off still, and only just announced and foretold. But it is happening. This is today.

And tomorrow the angels will tell what has happened with loud rejoicing voices, and we shall know it, and be glad, if we have believed and trusted in Advent” (p. 95).

In this life, and in The Life of the World to Come,
Amen.

ⁱ For the record, I do not participate in The Spotifys. Rather, in some (hopefully distant) time, I look forward to Saint Peter opening a great volume and reporting to me, “Morgan, you listened to Def Leppard’s Hysteria 7,232 times,” among other such statistics.

ⁱⁱ I hope that this will not be the first Trinity-pulpit reference to *Mad* magazine, but I suspect it more “likely” than “possible.” For the unfamiliar, I offer a [2019 reflection from the stately *New Yorker*](#) as testimony to *Mad*’s cultural place beyond the grubby hands of the 11-year-old boy I once was. As for Al Jaffee, I nearly fell out of my chair to learn that he a) is alive; b) was painting the Fold-In until LAST YEAR. Holy Moly; apparently parody is the key to a long life. Again for the uninitiated, the Fold-In was a regular feature for more than 50 years. A reader folded the sides of the back cover toward the middle to obscure the center portion of the art and reveal a new image – [find a helpful video here](#). In the sermon, I was picturing Pandemic Time as that hidden element under the creases, so many of us living as though February 2020 will somehow connect with a post-pandemic world and all this in-between time will not “count.” As my receding hairline and expanding waistline make clear, be sure that these days are definitely counting.

ⁱⁱⁱ Given the godlessness of most American politics, [I found Biden’s reference refreshing and heartening](#). I dogeared it last Advent for preaching this year.

^{iv} Nguyen, Peter. *Against The Titans: Theology And Martyrdom Of Alfred Delp*. Lexington Books/Fortress Academic. 2020. pp. 22-26. Nguyen approaches Delp with an affection and admiration that sometimes gets in the way of his subject. Even so, I appreciate his contextualizing Delp’s thinking in the German academy of its day. While Delp did not endeavor a systematic theology or a philosophy, his academic work clearly shaped his action.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ludwig Esch.

^{ix} “Delp threw himself into an evaluative study of [Martin] Heidegger’s *Being And Time*. Delp demonstrated a grasp of Heidegger’s ideas and the desire to argue with them.” With the verb choice “threw,” I take for granted that Nguyen intended the homage to Heidegger’s philosophy.

^x Though some sources note Delp was denied entrance into a PhD program because of his politics, his turn to the parish also falls in align with his *living* the theologies he studied and claimed.

^{xi} Kreisau Circle.

^{xii} *Watch For The Light: Readings For Advent And Christmas*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York. 2001. pp. 82-95. This collection introduced me to Delp some years ago. The editors appoint a selection for each day from November 24 through January 7, and draw on a rich range of authors.

^{xiii} In December 1933, Delp directed three “melancholic one-act plays” he had written, a collection he entitled *Eternal Advent*. This pregnant season seems to have drawn his imagination, well before his arrest.

^{xiv} *Watch For The Light*.