



All Creation Awaits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings (by Gayle Boss)

Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spend enough time with the tiniest creature, even a caterpillar; I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature. - Meister Eckhart

The roots of Advent run deep beneath the Christian church - in the earth and its seasons. Late autumn, in the northern hemisphere, brings the end of the growing season. When early agricultural peoples had harvested their crops and stacked food in their larders, they gave a collective sigh of relief. Their long days in the fields were over. For their labor they had heaps of fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat. The group body called out, *Feast!*

At the same time, no matter how glad the party, they couldn't keep from glancing at the sky. Their growing season was over because the sun had retreated too far south to keep the crops alive. Each day throughout the fall they watched the light dwindle, felt the warmth weaken. It made them anxious, edgy. Their fires were no substitute for the sun. When they had eaten up the crop they were feasting on, how would another crop grow? Throughout December, as the sun sank and sank to its lowest point on the horizon, they felt the shadow of primal fear - the fear of survival - crouching over them. They were feasting, and they were fearful, both. Yes, last year the sun had returned to their sky. But what if, this year, it didn't? Despite their collective memory, people wedded, bodily to the earth couldn't help asking the question. Their bodies, in the present tense, asked the question.

Our bodies still ask that question. In December the dark and cold deepen, and our rational minds dismiss it as nothing. We *know* that on December 21, the winter solstice, the sun will begin its return to the sky. But our animal bodies react with dis-ease. We feel, *The light - the life - is going*. Those particularly afflicted know themselves as SAD - Seasonal Affective Disorder - sufferers. Some of us cope by seizing distractions the marketplace gleefully offers: shopping, parties, more shopping.

The early Fathers of the Christian Church read the ebbing of light and heat and vegetable life each year as foreshadowing of the time when life as we know it will end completely. That it will end is the rock-bottom truth we sense deep in our primal bones every December, and it rightly terrifies us. To their and our abiding fear of a dark ending, the church spoke of an **adventus**: a coming. Faith proclaimed, *When life as we know it goes, this year and at the end of the years, One comes, and comes bringing a new beginning*.

This is a spiritual tradition and practice moving in step with creation. When the sun's light and heat wane, the natural world lets lushness fall away. It strips down. All energy is directed to the essentials that ensure survival. Engaging in stripping practices - fasting, giving away, praying - we tune into the rhythms humming in the cells of all creatures living in the northern hemisphere. We tune into our own essential rhythms.

[Using an Advent calendar that had animals behind little cut-out doors as my guide], I read a bit of poem or song or natural history that linked the creature behind that door to the heart of Advent: "Turtle is buried now in mud at the bottom of the pond. Encased in darkness, she is utterly still. She waits..."

Looking at the animal portraits show us how a healthy soul responds to encroaching darkness. And there's more than one response. There's the turtle's response, the loon response, black bear's response.... When that primal fear of the dark - of the end - begins to slide over us, animals unselfconsciously and forthrightly offer unfeared responses. They take in the threat of dark and cold, and they adapt in amazing and ingenious ways. They shape themselves to life as it is given. Each in its way says: *The dark is not the end, but a door. This is the way a new beginning comes*.

The practice of Advent has always been about helping us to grasp the mystery of a new beginning out of what looks like death. Other-than-human creatures - sprung, like us, from the Source of Life - manifest this mystery without question or doubt. The more I'm with animals and the more I learn about them, the more I know they can be more than our companions in this planet. They can be our guides. They can be to us "a book about God...a word of God," the God who comes, even in the darkest season, to bring us a new beginning.