

A Fable for Advent: A Message from our Priest-in-charge

There is an old fable that comes from the Middle Ages known as “the Cathedral and the Well.” It is a story that is told in many ways about a vast desert that was in the middle of a route followed by pilgrims.

In the midst of the desert there was a well that bubbled over with rushing water. It is said that the pilgrims, who made their treacherous way across that vast expanse with little to sustain them, would finally come to a place where they could hear the sound of rushing water, and they would stop and drink from its refreshing coolness and find themselves able to continue and make it to the other side. The well was placed just in time, and without it travelers would never make it through the desert.

The pilgrims were so thankful for their rescue by the well that they began to gather small stones, which they formed into a kind of altar of thanksgiving for the life-giving nourishment that the well provided. Over the centuries, pilgrims kept coming and finding refreshment, and they continued to place their stones out of thanks. In time, the stones were formed into a great cathedral, a magnificent structure of immense beauty that grew and eventually cover the well and silence the sound of the rushing water.

As the centuries past, with the well forgotten, some people still traveled that way, stopping to admire the cathedral from afar. And over time, the well of bubbling water was completely unknown, and attention was given only to the magnificent building.

Finally, many years later, a single pilgrim decided to approach the empty cathedral for a closer look and noticed one stone slightly out of place. Upon moving the stone, the pilgrim heard the sound of rushing water, and digging further found the source of the noise, the life-sustaining well beneath the building. Then the pilgrim removed the stone and took some of the water to nourish others so that they would not perish in the midst of their long journey. Now years later, the story concludes, all that remains is a very imperfect cathedral, which is continually being taken apart and rebuilt, always in a state of disrepair, but from it can still be heard the sound of the rushing water. And pilgrims can still find the well, and taste its refreshment and travel safely to their journey’s end.

Our preparation for the coming celebration of Christmas is something like that ancient fable. The structures that we continue to build around this festival can sometimes completely obscure the source of life-giving waters. But the pilgrims who stop and listen in silence still hear its bubbling sound and are refreshed upon their way.

For too many of us, our Advent season is frequently so cluttered and covered over with activity, that we, too, simply pass by, admiring a cathedral that others have built and never getting close enough to hear the sound of life-giving refreshment beneath. May each of us slow down during these four weeks before Christmas and be nourished by God’s life-giving refreshment.