

December 10 2017 2nd Sunday of Advent
Rev. Jen Nagel & Muffi Abrahamson
University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8
Blessing for Waiting, by Jan Richardson

“Bless Them”

At our house, we have a favorite Advent prayer.

We light the candles and use this back and forth dialogue prayer, that, for me, seems to capture Advent so well.

The response is super kid-friendly and easy for the rest of us, too: Come, Lord Jesus.

Let’s try it now, I’ll offer a line and then I ask you to respond, **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Let us pray: In our watching and our waiting, **Come Lord Jesus.**

In our hopes and in our fears, **Come, Lord Jesus.**

In our homes and in our world, **Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

In the midst of Advent, this season of preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ, we are dialoging.

Our focus this whole season is *The Intersection of Everything*.

A good dialogue, a good conversation, by nature dwells at these intersections...

the intersection of heaven and earth, life and death, God and humanity.

The intersection of our greatest hopes and our deepest fears,

The intersection of the brokenness of this world

and God’s dream for this new heaven and earth where righteousness is at home.

Today I am grateful that Muffi Abrahamson is willing to join me at this intersection in this conversation.

Many of you know that Muffi is an artist herself.

Today she shares with us about this art work that graces the front of our worship space during Advent.

This is Phil Thompson’s “Madonna and Christ Child in the City”.

Phil is a retired professor of Art from across the way at Augsburg University.

Phil and his spouse Joy are long-time members of this community.

They so wished they could be with us in worship, but getting out is hard for at this stage.

Thank you, Muffi, for helping us enter our theme and this season using Phil’s work.

JEN: Muffi, tell us first about your visits with Phil and Joy.

A. **Walking into their home** is an amazing experience.

Every inch of the house has their creative mark on it.

Much of their furniture is handmade.

The walls are covered in Joy’s colorful weavings and Phil’s paintings.

Everything has a story behind it.

- B. **I noticed quickly that Phil and Joy** are open-minded and intentional people.
They look at things creatively.
They see the world as it is, but also how it could be.
Phil and Joy are both awake in mind and spirit.
- C. **I'm always struck** by the fact that even though Phil retired long ago, he's still a teacher.
He talks about looking at familiar things with fresh eyes.
And he carries a pocket-sized sketchbook around the house to capture new insights.
- D. **The conversations** with Phil and Joy are so engaging.
We talk about people, places, and times past.
We talk about communication and patterns in society—about ideas, behaviors, and beliefs.
And, we talk a lot about making art...

JEN: Muffi, as an artist, you see things I don't, would you tell us more about this painting?

Yes, I'd be happy to!

But first I want to share with you what Phil says about making art. He says,
*Many of my ideas rise out of the unconscious. . . The images can be interpreted,
but they are not specific—they are open-ended.*

It's very important to Phil to preserve the viewer's freedom to interpret artwork.

That said, it was very helpful for me to hear Phil talk about this piece.

So, I'll share with you what I learned from Phil and, also, what I see.

1. **The first thing I notice: This is a BIG, impressive, bold** picture.
And it's on a **square canvas**, where all sides have equal dimensions,
helping focus our attention on the central image.
2. **The picture is filled with** all these amazing shapes and soothing colors,
and they all seem to be in perfect balance with each other.
And the more I look, the more I realize that Phil has carefully thought through
every part of this composition.
Everything is here for a reason.
Nothing is happenstance.
All the parts are integral to the whole.
Everything is connected.
3. **Then I'm drawn in, and I ask myself**, what's going on here?
Mary is standing in the center.
She is magnificent—she's monolithic in size—and she looks totally serene.
She wears a heavenly blue robe, the color historically used by artists to symbolize
how Mary carried divinity within her humanity.
4. **Mary is holding** her young son Jesus—the holy Christ Child.
Jesus is about 4 or 5 years old, dressed in a pure white robe.
His halo is a golden cross, the top of which becomes Mary's collar.
A spiritual ceremony seems to be taking place in this scene.

Jesus is holding in His left hand an orb with a cross on top—
a symbol of our world that He comes to save.

With His right hand, Jesus is bestowing a benediction on the viewer—on you, and
on me—but this blessing goes beyond us.

Mary is holding her holy child like a universal gift.

And I notice that the position of the child's young body almost anticipates the
Passion when Christ will offer Himself as the sacrificial lamb on the cross.

5. **As we widen our focus, we notice that Mary and Jesus** are standing amidst a modern cityscape.

And, when we look closer at this city, it starts looking very familiar.

We can actually identify buildings from present day Minneapolis:

we see on the left University Lutheran Church of Hope,
then the Foshay Tower,
the old Northwestern Bell Telephone Building,
1st National Bank,
and Minneapolis City Hall.

We know this place—it's our home.

Phil uses this familiar architecture to symbolize the place where we live.

But he is also symbolizing the population in general—humanity as a whole.

6. **So, there are Mary and Jesus**, standing in the midst of humanity, surrounded by an elaborate
cosmic pattern of radiant, interacting orbs.

These circle shapes are infinitely symmetrical—whole and complete.

The lower field of canvas is lined with an overlapping progression contemporary quatrefoils.

Shapes with four wings, commonly used in the Middle Ages.

These joined quatrefoils exist in this picture as both circles and diagonal crosses.

These interlocking shapes create a surprising and expansive ground that seems to be
moving and changing, depending on how you look at it.

This ground seems to be spirit-filled.

And the colors Phil has chosen for the most central of these quatrefoil wings make a bowl
to guide our eyes to the most important figures—Mary and Jesus.

7. **The upper canvas is full** of buoyant orbs, creating a magical, heavenly sky.

The large dazzling orb toward the right—the one with eight wings—makes
me think of the Star of Bethlehem and its guiding light.

Touching this sphere is Mary's golden halo.

And touching this is a triad of smaller circles that look like our moon and stars.

8. **Hugging the left side of the picture**, we see the largest shape in this magnificent sky.

It seems to depict the sun and is shown only as half a circle.

This is when I realize this whole picture radiates beyond the edges of the canvas.

It cannot be contained.

Phil is inviting us to imagine that the picture continues—far beyond what we can see.

On Thursday, as the evening was approaching, you and I sat in the front pew, preparing for today.

The sanctuary grew dark except for the twinkling of the tree lights and the spot lights on the painting.

We looked at these details you are naming for us today, but we also read together the promises from our scripture passages and the poetry of Jan Richardson.

Bless them, she says, bless us who wait: wait for news, wait for a phone call, wait with fear or joy or rage, bless them, bless us.

We talked of your mother-in-law beginning hospice care and how our lives are like grass that withers and the flower that fades.

We talked about struggles for physical and mental health, and the ache of grief for those we've lost.

We reflected on the news from that morning that Franken would resign from the Senate, and on heightened tensions in the Jerusalem and around the Middle East.

Prepare the way, make the way straight, John the Baptist cries.

Bless them, the poet writes.

Comfort, comfort, O people, God whispers on the pen of Isaiah.

How badly we need this new way, this blessing, this comfort.

We are weary and worried, and yearning for meaning.

In the middle of all of this, that's where Jesus is born again.

Muffi, you said something like, "Especially when you are really in it, when faced with the most devastating things, then there is nothing else to hang on to."

Right in the middle of all of this pain and joy, there is Mary, powerful and gentle, bold and courageous, holding Jesus, blessing us in these waiting times.

Final wisdom, Muffi?

When I look at Phil's beautiful painting, I'm blown away by how much it says to us.

Every part of the composition depends on the interaction between all the other parts to make a harmonious whole.

My teachers used to say that the best art transcends time and place.

Phil's painting is both intimate and universal.

All of these lines, shapes, and colors; the circles and crosses; the linear cityscape; and the organic human forms of Mary and Jesus—**they move, and they meet.**

And Jesus stands at the center of all of the intersections—blessing us.

That is incredible!

Thank you, Muffi, I'm grateful for your blessings today. Thank you.

Let's end as we began, with that back and forth prayer, remember? *Come Lord, Jesus* is the response.

We pray: In our watching and our waiting, **Come Lord Jesus.**

In our hopes and in our fears, **Come, Lord Jesus.**

In our homes and in our world, **Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**