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Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Advent 3: Special Music

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Luke 1:46b-55
Don't be a Tourist!

Whitney Cummings is a stand-up comedian, writer, and actress. I listened to a podcast of her telling the stories about her first visits to Al-anon, CODA, ACA support groups. These are all groups for people who grew up with alcoholics or in dysfunctional families. At the time, Whitney was not doing well, with raging anxiety and co-dependency disorder, but she was not ready to admit she really needed help. Yet somehow, she found herself in a support group. She says the first few meetings she sat in the back and just judged everyone else. She could come up with hilarious ways to judge and cast aside each person as someone who was completely unrelatable. Despite her judgmental start she kept going back. And finally, she started to share, she started to invest, she started to relate. She said she stopped being a tourist. When she stopped being a tourist, she started to reap the benefits of participation.

As we think about celebrating the birth of Jesus, we need to evaluate our participation in this holy season of Advent and our preparation for Christmas. Are we just being casual observers of it all, spiritual tourists looking in? Or are we here to really ponder the mysteries of the Word becoming flesh? Are we going through the motions on another holiday season or are we hoping to find connection with the divine? Advent is already over half over, now is the time that if we want to make something meaningful happen, we best begin.

My parents live in Sedona, Arizona where there are endless beautiful hiking trails. My mother serves on the sheriff's search and rescue posse. The group respond to calls week in and week out to help rescue lost and stranded hikers. Nine times out of ten the people who get themselves in bad situations are tourists. They are the ones who decide to go out on a hike at 5pm when there are dark clouds forming, and oh by the way they are wearing flip flops, and no they do not have any water with them, and yes, their cell phones are almost dead.

The tourists are the ones who do not respect or understand the terrain or pay enough attention to the landscape. The tourists are a disaster! Every time that we visit, my mother imparts a piece of wisdom to us about how to NOT be a tourist. Ways to stay safe, ways to respect the trails, ways to make things better for other people who will follow you.

On this third Sunday of Advent, the church always calls us to reflect on the role of Jesus' mother Mary. We read her song, the words of the Magnificat, that our choir is presenting for us so beautifully today. The song is profound in the depth of faith displayed and in the understanding for the challenge of her calling to be the mother of Jesus. Mary is not a tourist. Mary was the opposite of a tourist.

Mary was there when the tourists were just the shepherds, and the kings from the east were the only ones wise enough to pay him any attention. Mary was there before the crowds of tourists arrived to adore her son and ask him for favors. Mary was there when the tourists decided to turn on her child, they bullied him, they misunderstood him, they uttered awful things about him. Mary was there when the tourists, cheered 'Hosanna' and when they jeered, 'Crucify.' Mary was there at the cross, and at the gravesite, and at the empty house. Mary was there. Her youthful wisdom

was profound. She knew something incredibly significant was being asked of her when she was called to bear the Son of God. She appreciated the honor, and she accepted the sacrifice. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

What a reply to being asked to do something hard yet important! What if that was our frame of mind as we entered this season? “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Here am I. What if we really showed up for this season, we sang the carols with real hope in the words, what if we prayed with real fervor for God’s graces to come to strengthen us, what if we treated this space as a sanctuary where the winged angels really could bend near the earth? What if we entered this space thinking that it was really going to change things? What if the birth of Jesus, the presence of Jesus, the person of Jesus – could change our lives? Well, He can but here’s the deal.

He can’t change your life if you act like a spiritual tourist – popping by to see what Jesus is up to and snap a pic on your way out. Jesus changes things when we commit to following him. Jesus changes things when we are consistent in our devotion. Jesus changes things when we wrestle with his teachings and what they mean for how we live our lives. Jesus changes things when we are willing to be pushed and challenged and reformed by God Almighty. Are you willing? Are you here for that type of experience or just the holly, jolly fancy Christmas stuff?

If we show up in this holy season, and we do not pay attention and participate with heart and the mind and the soul, then we are like out of towners in flip flops stomping around the manger scene asking obnoxious questions and leave our candy cane wrappers on the side of the road. Please don’t be a tourist.

This is a holy, special season, when Jesus was born and that is nothing short of the largest miracle of all – God desiring a relationship with us, so God sent Jesus to relate, to bless, to save us. This miracle means, you can personally have connection with the divine, you can get to know the ways of God’s, and you can follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit in your own life. That is what Jesus did for us at Christmas – Jesus brought the holy to us. And this is the season to be inspired, reformed, compelled to honor and worship once again - or you can just be a tourist, a casual observer looking in the stained-glass windows without every really showing up.

Now I need to confess to you, that far as church attenders go, and really showing up, I am pretty much the worst. On those Sunday’s, I am not leading worship here and I am on vacation, and I find a local church to visit, I have the hardest time shutting off my minister brain and not thinking, “Ohhh, I wouldn’t do it that way, or ‘wow that is terrible hymn’ or ‘Man, where is this sermon going?’” I really am bad. Honestly. I must remind myself when I catch myself thinking that way that I am there as worshipper. I am there to connect with God. I am not a tourist. I must work hard to switch gears and make the shift into contemplation and prayer and confession and connection. Those are the things I desire by going there in the first place and yet if I am not careful, I will get in my own way and none of those things will happen.

We can get in the way of that which is special and holy. So whatever baggage you bring into this space – whether it is your judgmental mind, your suspicious brain, your indifferent attitude, your calloused heart, your overcommitted schedule, or just your own weariness and fatigue – I want

you to remember this appeal...Don't be a tourist! Whisper it to yourself as you slide into your pew each week and claim this time for something else.

Don't be a tourist – God has things to teach you.

Don't be a tourist – this faith can really help you.

Don't be a tourist – God desires connection with you.

Sometimes we need the reminder to get out of our own way and make space in our hearts and our minds for God to show up. 'Tis the season for God to show up.

Emmanuel, God with us, may we allow it to be so!

Amen.