

## A Season of Presence

**Rev. Joan Montagnes**

If, on an early morning, you wake in India before the sun has risen to greet the day, and if you venture forth, wrapped woolen against the cold, on foot to where the eastward road ends at the edge of the village to see dayspring dawn kiss snowy Himalayan peaks pink as they emerge from night; if you return breath-taken and chilled-through, the grandmothers will offer you a cup of steaming, bone warming chai tea and ask if the mountains offered you their *darśan*. They will ask if the mountains chose to reveal themselves to you or whether they remained cloaked in the sky's inner sanctum of cloud, or if they remained masked by the mists of this distracted world. You see, *darśan*, in Sanskrit, means 'vision,' in particular, it means a vision of the Divine, the Holy, the Sacred, or being in the Presence of the Divine.

There is no doubt, that those mountains which revealed themselves to you on this auspicious morning are magnificently Holy. Anyone from Richard Dawkins, to Henry David Thoreau, to Mohandas Gandhi would wonder at their glory, probably.... Although the mountains showed themselves to you, and the grandmothers tend the fire knowingly while the kettle brews promising comfort will curl up on your lap and peace will make its bed in your heart, after such a morning, a waking, a walking, a vision, you need to understand – the mountains need not have shown themselves to you, they chose to, and you were ready to accept their gift. You see, you have to make yourself available. You have to wake up, you have to be prepared if you want to be in the presence of anything.

It is a very western notion that the Holy will break in on your life unbidden. Gabriel broke in on Mary as the Holy Spirit chose Mary, and not only

demanded that she say “Yes,” but then followed through by impregnating her, obliterating any life plans she may have had. It is a very western idea that the Holy can break in on your life without your consent, without its presence being your heart’s deepest desire to begin with. Think of Zeus transforming himself into all those swans, bulls, eagles, and showers of gold, raping all those women and goddesses. So very aggressive, all very western. What the grandmothers, with their kettles and pots of chai tea, in their smoky homes in the foot hills of India know is that the mountains will only offer their *darśan*, their presence, to you if you have made yourself ready for the Holy’s presence in your life.

We are deep into the darkest time of the year. A time for hearty soups and stews. A time to bundle under comforters. To escape in books and find good excuses not to go outside. We are deep into the hibernating time. A season to find a cozy mitten to climb into. A season to retreat into ourselves, to our quiet places, echoing only with the sound of flickering candles and wet tires smacking the road outside, beyond hearth and home. We are deep into the fallow time, when life lies frozen, dormant beneath the earth clod. Not dead, far from dead, but doing all we need to do to burst forth in birth and rebirth when the time comes. We are deep into the darkest time of year. A season to retreat into ourselves to prepare and make ourselves ready for the Holy as it may present itself, to entreat the Holy to come within as Love, as Truth, as Hope. To prepare ourselves for bursting forth in birth and rebirth when the time comes.

Out of all the moments in history, this is the time to say “Yes.” Make no mistake. History will not bother to break in on your life asking you for a statement because you are special, presenting you with a gift that is your heart’s desire, as if History could read your mind and was here to make you happy. No, if you do not

spend time in preparation, being present to what truly matters, listening hard to the blood rushing in your veins, nourishing compassion and neighborly love; love even for those of you who do not understand and do not like, quietly connecting to that network of mutuality that calls us to justice because our lives depend on it -- if you do not take the time to become clear within yourself and with History -- if you do not take the time to become clear about exactly what it is you want for yourself and your community this holiday season of Presence, you can be sure, History will give you an Ugly Christmas Sweater to wear. And you may have to wear it for eight long years.

A friend said to me that they had heard a message from a Wiseman this week. Funny how those messages become wise only once we are prepared and present enough to hear them. The message was this: “Don’t blame our leaders for being who they are even if they are ugly in spirit. The leaders are just the representatives of the people. Don’t blame the leaders. Become the democracy you want to become. Take some responsibility. Wake up! See the million ways we have become what we have become. Don’t blame the leaders. Don’t blame the opposition. Look inward and see what we have become, and where you want to go.”

Wise words, harsh words, to ponder in our hearts in this season when we are painfully called to be present. As we sit quietly with candles in this darkest time of the year, as we restrain ourselves from reacting, from thoughtlessly lashing out or offering feel-good empty sacrifices to a world that demands so much more of us. Wise words, harsh words. As we try to live in this present and sacred moment pondering History, pondering the nature of our own birth and rebirth. We may be wearing an Ugly Christmas Sweater today, much to our dismay and

amazement, but keep burrowing, snuffling, swooping, lumbering along and you may find a cozy, snow-white mitten to crawl into.

The story of the mitten is a mystical story. It is not exactly a perfect metaphor, as all the animals keep the peace out of fear. But at least none of the animals is remotely tempted to use their strong legs, glinty talons, prickles, or sharp teeth. Somehow there is always room for one more to come in from the cold. The story of the mitten is a mystical story which explains that there is always room for one more in the Divine's embrace. There is more love everywhere. Come, come into this place, come in from the cold, come into this cozy place which we make holy by our collective presence. Come in with all your vulnerabilities and all your strengths. Your fears and anxieties, loves and hopes. For here you need not hide, nor pretend, nor be anything other than who you are right now and who you are called to become. Come into this place where we can heal and be healed, forgive and be forgiven. Come into this place, where the ordinary is sanctified, the human is celebrated, and compassion is expected. Grandmother's good knitting holds fast, there is always room for one more. You will not be denied a place in the divine presence. You just have to nose your way in, come as you are, no promises to keep or statements to sign. You are welcome.

If on a December morning you wake before the sun has risen, to greet the day, and if you venture forth, confidently striding into winter's windy chill, clear with yourself and History about your heart's desire, fired with compassion and love of neighbor, the snow and ice will melt, retreat beneath your feet. You will be in the presence of the Holy. If you understand your place, your responsibility, in the network of today's mutuality, and if you begin to knit, with stitches good and

strong, stitches that will hold fast a network of tomorrow. And if, while you knit, you share the tangled yarn knit with others, and still others, and still others. Give and take, listen and tell, mend wounds, cut out knots, darn the holes and make them whole. If you pay attention, stay awake, be present as you knit, History will stretch and pull and bulge and change and grow until it reflects the Holy and there will be room for everyone, everyone! Then the grandmothers in the foot hills of India, in the Eastside neighborhoods, in refugee camps, at Standing Rock, will nod their heads, knowingly, and we will have a vision of the Divine on earth. We will have prepared ourselves for the Divine presence on earth, a beloved community of comfort and peace for all.

**For further study**

Brett, Jan. *The Mitten*, Hodder Wayland, 1999.