



BREAKING OPEN SERIES

TRIM THE HEARTH

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My mother lives in a house that was built in the 1700s. It is in Massachusetts. It was first a dugout of sorts. They built the house first by digging out the hill, the back and the side walls, the earth, so that they could save time and energy in building the roof and the front door. When they built up over the hill, they built a framed house structured on huge wooden beams and retaining walls of stone. And they quarried these stones out of the surrounding villages. They built a simple house above the dugout, four rooms, and above that, two more. As you might have guessed, back then, before we ruined the environment, the weather was fairly predictable. Fall came in September and October. Harvest of the apples went into crates in the root cellar, the old dugout. Wood was cut and dried all summer for the heat of winter, which came in November and lasted until June.

That meant that more than half of the year required some effort to keep the buckets of water from freezing and the house habitable by keeping the fires going. They were way tougher than we are back then. They could tolerate a house at 50 degrees, a luxurious temperature by keeping four fireplaces roaring. The three fireplaces are on that first floor of the old dugout. The other one below where they baked the bread. And in order to get the wood for these four fireplaces, for all those months, they had to start cutting wood in the summer. No chainsaws to make it easier. They dragged the wood from the forest with horses. They cut and chopped and dried it. So no one froze their little toes off during the winter. And of those fireplaces, two were still in use in my mom's house. They create a nice ambience for those sitting around the living room or in the dining room while the boiler blows heat up through the thin walls and airplanes take people to the south so they don't have to engage in winter.

But back in the old days, they knew something about trimming the hearth and setting the table like our advent song says today, people look east. To trim the hearth was to dig out the ashes and the

coals and not burn the house down while you got them out into the snow. To trim the hearth meant to tidy the stanchions and clean the chimney and the flue and stack the wood neatly and chip away at slivers of wood to make the kindling and prepare the flint or later to procure the matches, to fix the hole in the bellows to more directly push the air at the fire. These people knew how to trim the hearth indeed. So when those old New Englanders went to church on November 30th, having just fed their families whatever they could from the harvest, and they heard the song we sang today: People look east, the time is near of the crowning of the year. Make your house fair as you are able. Trim the hearth and set the table. People look east and sing today. Love the guest is on the way.

Some of them let out a big deep sigh, "The work is never done. The preparations never over. And the church is now telling me the Sunday after Thanksgiving, after all those relatives went home, after Uncle George left a mess at the kitchen with his succotash and his nasty political views, that after all that, I have to trim the hearth, make the house fair for a guest?" "Tarnation," they would say. "What a rattle," they would say. "And no taxation without representation, and good morrow. And how do you fare in gardy loo?" And now I'm just listing 18th century things that I looked up in the internet.

But you get my wandering drift. Make your house fair as you are able. Trim the hearth and set the table. The good news for us is that we don't have to scrub the whole house clean of the soot of the fireplace or scrape the wash basin. We just prepare the hearth and the table. Make it warm and welcoming. "By my snum," they would say. Snum meant disbelief. You can use that on your friends. "By my snum." Yes, the hymn says, "Do all these things. The time is near." But, the hymn says, "First, look east. First, look east. The sun rises every day. Have you noticed it in your busy days? The Aurora Borealis rising at midnight. Low, I see a star in the east. Let's follow it to the blessed child."

Have you gone out at midnight to stare at the majesty of the stars? God's creation, you looking at God, God looking at you. "You, the eye of God," said Emerson, as he stared at the clear night sky above. He said, "I become the transparent eyeball. I become nothing. I see all. The currents of the universal being circulate through me. I am part and particle of God. People, look east." Easy for you to say, Mr. Emerson, you didn't have to keep four fireplaces going or feed the sheep in the morning, but we get it. Prepare, the day is near, trim the hearth, but before all that, look east. Look at the currents of the universal being circulating through you.

Emerson is drawing here on the German Kantian theology. Kant said, "The mind structures reality of the things we experience, making what is real knowable." And Emerson continues, "When the ego vanishes, when we see all, the currents of the divine are noticed." The God experience that we have every day, but are too busy to see. When we pause, when we look east, when we look up from the chores, when we stop, when we see the stars, when we let the eternal being invade our souls, we experience God. People, look east, says the song. "The sun rises. The stars shine despite the ramp up toward the Civil War," Emerson said.

Despite the Jacksonian murder of the native people that he read about in the conquered Gazette, despite the Epstein files distracting us from all manner of evil actions that the White House executes, the sun rises because the sun always rises. But at this time of year, it becomes more precious. The

days shorten and the stars are out longer calling us to something precious. Trim the hearth for the heart can be warmer. Set the table for you can invite a guest to sit with you. Feeding someone maybe the most radical, precious thing you can do.

Looking east is a holy act here in this advent commandment. The first glimpse of day's light, the sign that we have another chance to live this life and do some good with the gifts we have. That sign comes from the east every day, whether we are there to see it or not. And you can set the table every day for more love and light in your life. For me, as we move rapidly toward the clubhouse turn of the year, the expectations grow. What is coming? What potential for love and light can I make possible? James Carroll hits on this in his reading in his piece that we read today. It says that "The present moment always points beyond itself to what is coming. And that is the ground of human genius since humans are constantly seeking to surpass themselves," he says, "Like the present, then the future too is sacred." That this religious idea also informed Western culture shows up with power in the scientific age, with the discovery of evolution. Science that is, gave us a new language for this advent dynamic that life is a process always on the move.

And I say, if we are always on the move, never able to go back, always getting the rising sun until we cannot get it any longer, isn't that a built-in human invitation to do something, to be something, to make something that is good in the world? Or at least to build in Emersonian pauses in our day, in our to-do lists, to know the divine current runs through us and to notice it. To trim the hearth is to tend to the center of our lives, to make ready the place where warmth and connection and renewal can take hold of us. "Make your house fair," it says, "As you are able." I love that because there's grace there. It doesn't ask for perfection. It asks just for effort. We are invited to prepare as best we can to offer what we have in the moments we have to each other. To trim the hearth, to speak the truth and love, to show up for one another in hard times, to work, to bring more justice and kindness into the world, to pause long enough to look for the holy in our day.

That is to trim the hearth, to rest, to breathe, to sit quietly beside the warmth we can build together. And it also means occasionally asking ourselves difficult questions, like, "What has grown cold in me? What ashes need clearing away? What small flame of love or hope do I need to rekindle?" To trim the hearth is to make room for God's presence. Not something far away in the heavens, but here within and among us. The hearth is the holder of the fire, which in scriptures is sacred. Moses meets God in the burning bush. The disciples see the tongues of fire at Pentecost. Fire transforms and warms and illuminates. So when we trim the hearth in this season, we are preparing for the fire of love, for Jesus's light to burn more clearly in and through us, the Christmas story says, for the night sky to reveal something prescient inside us, to invite a small spark, a kind word, an act of mercy, a moment of stillness so we might nurture something warm that grows in the world.

Trim the hearth, sweep away what is cold or weary. Lay the kindling of hope. Watch for the light that is coming, the light that is already here. "By your lady, what cheer? Well, my dear, the proof of the pudding is in the eating," they would say. Now I'm just saying 18th century sayings again, which you can use on your friends. "By your lady," you just say to them.

Friends, happy advent. We fall off the advent cliff right now and you go out in the world and you look east. That's what you do. And you kindle your flame and you clean your hearth, the hearth of your heart. Be well, set the table. May it be set also for you by others. And may you approach everything with gratitude and love. Amen and amen.