

ADVENT WEEK 3: ORDINARY RICHES CAN BE STOLEN

[NB: check the byline, thanks. /~Rayne]

“You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. Don’t imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things. Your affection is inside of you. If only you could realise that, you would not want to be rich. Ordinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot. In the treasury-house of your soul, there are infinitely precious things, that may not be taken from you. And so, try to so shape your life that external things will not harm you.” –
Oscar Wilde

I’m behind schedule with my holiday baking. This month has been awful, the waiting for decisions and events draining, time broken with disruptions. Even the December sky reflects the void where things haven’t arrived or occurred as they should.

I don’t write this asking for sympathy because we are all human and travel the same road, follow the arrow of time in the same direction, moving toward greater entropy. Yet the waiting this season is painted with stress and tinged with dread because family members are ill. At least one is and has been in a mortal battle – this holiday is likely their last Christmas.

All of us in our lives have and will face this same liminal space where the edges aren’t defined, the end isn’t clear and the beginning beyond it even less so. I can almost feel wings brushing by as the end coalesces; it feels familiar, like the dark night in deep labor not knowing exactly what will come and wanting an end, expectation shaping whatever is ahead of

birth.

I should be baking even now, flinging a cloud of flour around the kitchen in the absence of flurries this El Niño winter. But I'm dragging my feet because we don't know where the holiday will be spent. Why spend the effort to make baked goods when there's no scheduled feast at which to serve them?

Bake I must, though. One of the baked goods will be shipped across the country tomorrow. It constitutes a long-distance communion with family.

The other baked good is a practice piece because I'm trying out a new recipe. If it's good I will make it again next weekend for the holiday to share with yet more family, whenever we learn where and when we will gather.

This is the deep end of Advent. The darkest night of the year is four days ahead, a mere 100 hours until the winter solstice.

Prepare your candles and bonfires to light the way.

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Following is the stollen in progress. I've pulled a no-knead recipe to try since I don't know how much time I'll have to bake later in the week. A no-knead recipe also offers the convenience of scale. I can start several loaves so long as I have enough roomy bowls, unlike my other bread recipes for which I use my bread machine.

No-Knead Stollen

Ingredients:

3-1/2 cups all-purpose flour
2 tsp kosher salt
2 tsp instant yeast
1/2 tsp ground cardamom
4 eggs
3/4 cup water
1/4 cup sugar

1 tsp vanilla extract
3/4 cup unsalted butter melted
1/2 cup dried cranberries or cherries
1/2 cup raisins – your choice golden
sultanas or dark
1/2 cup candied citron
1/4 cup orange juice or rum

1/4 cup butter melted
1/2 cup powdered sugar

Instructions:

Night before baking: In a small glass bowl add dried fruit, and candied citron with orange juice or rum. Cover and let stand to absorb fluid.

In a large bowl add flour, salt, cardamom. Stir together and set aside.

In a separate bowl mix eggs, water, vanilla, and sugar until the sugar has dissolved. Stir in yeast and let the mixture stand for 10 minutes; it should be slightly foamy.

Whisk into the wet ingredients the melted butter until smooth.

Incorporate wet mixture into dry mixture, stirring with a wooden spoon/rubber spatula/dough whisk until ingredients pull together and no dry flour remains. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap or lid; let stand for 1 hour; dough should be puffy.

Drain any excess liquid from dried fruit and citron. Uncover dough and add fruit and citron, lifting edges of dough over the fruit and pushing the fruit into the dough; repeat until fruit has been evenly incorporated into the dough.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly-greased or well-floured surface. If two smaller loaves desired, divide in half, and shape each portion into an oval. Otherwise shape into one large oval for

one loaf.

Place on a parchment- or silicon baking mat-lined baking sheet. Cover with plastic wrap and a tea towel in a warm place and let rise for about an hour; dough will have roughly doubled when ready to bake.

Bake in a preheated 350F degree oven for 35-40 minutes for two loaves, 40-45 minutes for single large loaf. Check internal temperature using an instant-read thermometer; bread is done at 190F degrees, crust will be golden brown.

Brush still hot loaf/loaves with melted butter. Allow to cool slightly, then dust with powdered sugar to finish. Allow to cool completely before slicing.

I've not made this before, can't make any claims about the results at this point. But I will share the results as an update here once completed.

Welcome to the limnal space of Advent, where we wait the unknown with expectations of stollen riches.

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Giving myself over to Advent this past week, I went digging in the Christmas decorations where our family's advent wreaths of seasons past have been stored. Lo – there were several advent observation booklets stored with the wreaths and candles.

What a coincidence that December 15th one year included a blurb about fruit cake:

Fruitcake seems to be related to the English "plum pudding" which was served on festive occasions. (There was a "plum cake" too which, unlike plum pudding, was not steamed.)

"Plum" was used as a generic word for

dried fruit which, along with nuts, became the primary ingredients for fruitcake.

Since Christmas came at a time of year when fresh fruit was not available, cakes with dried fruit became more and more associated with this feast.

Fruitcake is nutritional, and keeps for a long time. Over the course of time, this has given it a number of uses. For example, fruitcake was useful for nourishment to carry on long journeys.

In some places, the top layer of the wedding cake was fruitcake. The other layers were served to the guests, but the top layer was saved for the bridal couple so that they could save it and enjoy it on their anniversaries.

This family will have a traveling fruitcake this year. Possibly two, depending on what happens over this last full week of Advent. Seriously hope the these stollen fruitcakes aren't lingering around next holiday, though.

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This is an open thread. What fruited cakes have you run across this past week? Have you baked? Don't forget this is a stollen election – be prepared to throw your vote at a fruitcake.