

The Two Faces of Advent

sermon digest

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Luke 1: 39-56
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The church lives from Advent to Advent. The culture in which we live marks time with the passing of one year into another as we move from December into January and with the sense of a fresh start that we experience every fall at the beginning of the school year. The church year, however, begins with Advent and the anticipation of the coming of God in the birth of Jesus. Today, the third Sunday of Advent, symbolized in the Advent wreath by the single pink candle, is Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete*, the Latin word for *rejoice*, is appropriate to Advent, for “the Gospel,” as Luther Seminary Professor Mark Hillmer has put it, “was born amid shouts of praise. Hallelujahs were everywhere” [*Interpretation*, 1994, p. 391].

Let’s be clear though that the joy of this day is not that of a tinsel town merriment. Our goal is not to get with the mood of the malls and spread a froth of happiness and jingle bells over our gathering. Appropriately, we extend our best efforts in worship in observing Advent. The vast array of colors, instruments and singing, banners and special decorations reflects the degree to which we stretch ourselves to play out the rich drama of a God who comes among us. I recall a friend in Louisville telling of returning to worship during Advent one year after having been out of worship for some time. The beauty of all she saw and heard so moved her that all she could do was sit and weep.

During Advent we sing songs of anticipation and joy; but in keeping with the Gospel story, we seek to remember that Jesus’ coming is not just the story of happiness and light. It is the story, too, of the darkness of this world encountered by that light. Advent does not turn a blind eye to the darkness into which God came then or comes today. Advent looks the darkness squarely in the eye and gives itself to proclaiming a light that the darkness, trying with all its might, cannot extinguish.

Episcopal priest and author Fleming Rutledge recalls Christmas cards produced by the Catholic Interracial Council of the Twin Cities. In 1968, the festive orange-red cover of the first card featured the words of the Benedictus: “From on high our God will bring the rising Sun. . . .” Not surprising. What one would expect of a Christmas card. Opening the card, however, the reader was jerked to attention by a stark black-and-white photograph of a small African-American child caught by a ray of sunlight as he sat listlessly in the shadows of a slum courtyard. Alongside the photo, a continuation of the verse from the cover: “. . . to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.” In like manner, the card’s cover the following year trumpeted the words of John the Baptist: “There is One among you. . . .” and inside, another black-and-white photograph, this time of a young Vietnamese girl with the blank, stunned expression on her face of a child in wartime. Alongside the picture were words completing those on the cover, “. . . whom you do not recognize.”

Advent, you see, has two faces. It has the face of rapturous joy and expectation as the light of God breaks in upon us, but Advent shines that light upon the suffering world upon which it breaks. Advent, you might say, is a paradox. It is, in Fleming’s words, about “the coming triumph of God manifest precisely in the darkness of this present evil age.” Advent is “the paradoxical combination of waiting and hastening, suffering and joy, judgment and deliverance, apocalyptic woe and eschatological hope” [“The Two Faces of Advent,” *Christian Century*, Dec 1, 1999]. Advent is both faces, both sides of the paradox. To dismiss either is to miss the meaning of Advent, the reality of what happens when God enters our world.

Mary’s song celebrates the God who bends to the poor and lowly. Enter Mary. We too easily make ourselves comfortable with her, and in doing so, turn a deaf ear to what she says. Her Magnificat is definitely a song of the *Anawim*, the Poor Ones. The lowliness of estate about which she sings is not just about humility. It is about social standing. It is about poverty, for Mary, in the words of James Kay, “is dirt poor. She is poor and pregnant and unmarried. She is in a mess” [*Christian Century*, Dec 1, 1999]. And yet, Kay observes, she sings. Why?

She sings, obviously, of God’s goodness to her: “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me.” But in the tradition of the first Mary—Moses’ sister Miriam—and Hannah, Deborah and Judith, Mary sings of a God who comes in delivering love on behalf of the poor and lowly, the weak and oppressed. Hers is a freedom song on behalf of all the faithful poor in the land. She sings for all who, despite their poverty and wretchedness, hold fast to the hope that God will make a way where there has been no way. She prophesies about a way opening, in James Kay’s words, “in the wilderness of injustice.” So sure is she of God’s deliverance, she speaks in the past tense of a God who is acting into the future: God “has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts . . . brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” God “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” The God of the Exodus is the God of Jesus Christ—a God who comes bringing release to the captive, sight to eyes that are blind, hope in the face of hopelessness. It is in the name of this God that Mary sings praise.

Can we sing Mary’s song? So what about us? Is Mary’s song a song that we can sing? Can we rejoice in a

God who has a history of being on the side of the poor and weak. Can we sing Mary's song on Wall Street and Main Street? In the Washington Beltway? In Oak Ridge, the Silicon Valley and the Research Triangle? Or can Mary's song only be raised in the ghettos, in the hidden and forgotten places of our nation and world? Taking seriously Mary's refrain of God's care for the poor and oppressed, we cannot in good faith turn our backs on the social and political implications of God's coming into our world. But does God's coming among *us* signify good news for *us*?

Speaking to the hope of new beginnings encapsulated in the infancy hymns in the Gospel of Luke, Gail O'Day suggests that Advent holds out just such hope for us today. Just as Mary's song of praise anticipates that the God who has faithfully come in gracious deliverance in the past will come in grace in the future, so Advent reminds us that we are not held slaves to things the way they are. Advent points us toward a future that is not closed, that is not bound to being nothing more than a repetition of the present. Advent, in other words, points us toward a future that is open to the fresh and continuous infusion of grace.

The Advent season also rekindles our expectancy and hope for God's presence among us. We do not hope simply for the romantic, lyrical birth of a baby in a manger, but we hope for God's decisive entry into the world. Advent announces that yet again our lives can begin anew, that once more we have the chance to welcome the arrival of God. Each Advent we are reminded that the future is always open, that God's promises are ever new, that God's coming to us is ever imminent [*"The Praise of New Beginnings," Journal for Preachers, 1990*].

The joy of Advent occurs in the middle of and in spite of the difficulties and suffering of our lives and our world. The joy of Advent is not blind to the circumstances that beset our lives and world, but neither is it finally conditional upon those conditions. The story is told of a young pastor who went to visit an elderly parishioner. The woman's husband and both of her children had preceded her in death, and now she was in failing health and lived on very limited means. Not sure what to say or do, the pastor asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?" The woman quickly responded, "Yes there is! Pray with me pastor, and let it all be praise."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was not a stranger to suffering, sums it up for us:

Joy abides with God, and it comes down from God and embraces spirit, soul, and body; and where this joy has seized a person, there it spreads, there it carries one away, there it bursts closed doors. A sort of joy exists that knows nothing at all of the heart's pain, anguish, and dread; it does not last, it can only numb a person for a moment. The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable [*From Christmas with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Augsburg Books*].

The Gospel of John saw it, too. In Jesus, the Light of God came into the world, and the darkness, trying with all of its might did not cannot and will not put that light out. Thanks be to God!