

Two Advent Meditations

- God's Christmas Gift
- If You Are the One, Cousin, then Why is my Father in Gaol?

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God's Christmas Gift

A communion meditation based on Isaiah 2:1-5 and Romans 13:11-14

A minister whose children's stories were not all that engaging, and his end-of-story morals rather predictable, called the children to the front one Sunday, and said to them, "I'm thinking of something that is brown, has a bushy tail, and every fall gathers acorns. Can you guess what I'm thinking of?" After a long silence, one of boys answered: "I'm sure the right answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."

It's not uncommon to find adults asleep in church, but it's unfortunate when we begin to lull minds to sleep at such a young age! The obvious may be staring us in the face, yet we plod on doggedly, trotting out the old cliches and responses, even if they're cynical cliches and jaded responses.

Even those with an eye to the new are not always open to it. Martin Luther, responsible for considerable ferment in church history, travelled to Rome in 1510. Luther's diary of that trip reveals that he completely missed noticing any sign of the Renaissance. (Erik Erikson, "Young Man Luther") His diary contains remarks about the elegant, ancient aqueducts and about church-operated hospitals and orphanages, but he seems to have taken no notice whatsoever of the paintings, sculpture, or spirit of a new era which was in full blossom all around him! What was culturally a time of brilliant and stunning accomplishments—in scholarship, literature, science, and the arts—with fine libraries and learned academies and universities flourishing—completely bypassed Luther.

It can happen to the best of us. Most of us enter the Advent season in a semi-stuporous state. Having gathered our spiritual nuts for the winter, some of us have drifted off. It's not accidental that some of the Advent readings try to rouse us from our slumber! Our reading from Romans, addressing pre-Renaissance Roman Christians who were starting to nod off, says, "...now (is) the moment for you to wake from sleep." (Romans 13:11) The Gospel reading for this Sunday sounds the same alarm: "Keep awake...., for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ...you...must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." (Matthew 24:42, 44)

In the 1920s there was an epidemic of lethargic encephalitis along the eastern seaboard of the United States. A professor of clinical neurology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, chronicling his experience with dozens of this epidemic's victims, uses words and phrases like "apathetic," "dull," "devoid of emotional

expression," and "listless" to describe the behaviour of these patients. (Dr. Sachs, "Awakenings")

Fortunately, for those suffering from the physical form of lethargic encephalitis, the administration of a new drug (L-dopa) worked wonders! A remarkable transformation occurred as symptoms were reduced or disappeared entirely. Some awakened only for a short time and then lapsed back into a trance-like existence—that happens in the church as well—but many once again became animated, spontaneous, and active participants in daily living.

Awakened by a Human Birth

I daresay that though many of us may begin our Advent journey to Christmas in a dullish state, something during this season will awaken our spiritual longing. It may be a phrase in a Christmas carol. It may be a glorious rendition of the Messiah. It may be a Christmas card from a long-lost friend. It may happen today. It may happen next Sunday. It may happen on Christmas Eve. It may happen on a Thursday at midnight on a street corner in Hull, but somewhere along your Advent journey something will animate and awaken you to the spirit of Christmas.

There are at least two gifts that God gives us at Christmas that have the potential to awaken our spiritual longing. One is the incarnation, and the other is hope. Ten years ago, in transit to Africa, our family had a stopover in London. With only three days to see the sights, we touched down lightly on all the usual tourist spots. In Trafalgar Square my eye inevitably was caught by the very tall column in the square, atop of which sits a statue of England's great naval hero, Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson. Erected in 1849, the statue is so high above the passers-by that Nelson's features are indiscernible from the pavement below. Some fifty years ago, however, an exact replica of Lord Nelson was placed at eye level where its details can be examined and appreciated by the people walking through the Square.

In a sense that's what Christmas is for Christians. Lest humanity find the God of the Old Testament too lofty, indiscernible, and unapproachable, the birth of Jesus brought God up close. Lest humanity find the God of Mount Sinai too enveloped in smoke, the mystery of God became incarnate and fully visible in a human being. Lest humanity find the God of the Old Testament too stern, God revealed Himself in a child, an infant, which, like any new baby, everyone loves to hold close and admire. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, God came down to walk among us, that we might see Him, know Him, be made fully aware of His love for us, and become fully alert to the will of God for all humankind—so that we, as Isaiah says, might "walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:3).

Animated by Hope

In addition to the Christmas gift of the Incarnation, God gives us another gift that has the potential to awaken and animate us—a gift of inestimable worth—the gift of hope. When a family gathers around to open gifts on Christmas Day, or Christmas Eve, or whenever you do it, most eyes—especially the younger ones—are open, and fully alert. Lethargic encephalitis is fairly rare at Christmas. There's a quality to that moment that makes it unlike other moments, and affects us more than other moments. Likewise God's Christmas gift of hope lends to what would otherwise be normal moments a

special, expectant quality. Hope opens our minds and imaginations to another dimension of reality—a dimension that often transcends reality. It can animate visions of spiritual renaissance astounding in their breadth and audacity! And energize us to work toward their realization.

That's what happened to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Though living in circumstances noted in his diary as extremely distressing—it felt like God had abandoned Israel—the prophet Isaiah envisions an astounding transformation. The sword, a symbol of the prevailing ethos, changed in Isaiah's vision into a plowshare! The spear, the daily weapon of choice, changed in Isaiah's imagination into an implement of choice—a pruning hook! Schools and universities, funded by the military, which had hitherto taught warcraft and churned out Ph.D's of destruction, were transformed in Isaiah's vision into flourishing academies of peace! Isaiah, inspired by hope in God, foresaw a time when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4)

Advent raises up the voices inspired by biblical hope, and gives us an opportunity, once again, to commit ourselves to their vision of a world at peace, living and working in harmony, and with a yearning for a just and loving world, a yearning so deep that no evidence to the contrary can shake it. AMEN

November 29, 1998

If You Are the One, Cousin, Then Why is My Father in Gaol?

A sermon based on Matthew 11:2-11 and Isaiah 35:1-10

My father was a tough nut to crack. My father was John, the Baptist. You may be unaware that John, the Baptist had children, but here I am. And I've come to you today as his emissary, in a way. The Gospel reading for today, depending on the interpreter, often misrepresents my father.

Now, make no mistake. I am nothing like my father. I grew up in Jerusalem—a city kid, and having a father like John, the Baptist is probably like growing up in this city and having a father from Saskatchewan! My father used to go on and on about how the wilderness shapes character; about how walking five miles to Hebrew school with a few grasshoppers in his "Rogerstein" syrup pail toughened him up; about how one meal a day was a luxury!

I don't know. I'm not a wilderness kid, but I do know my father was tough. Some would say strange! Living in the desert is not for everyone. A diet of locusts and wild honey tends to separate the queasy from those with a stronger palate. His wardrobe—a rough-cut coat of camel's hair—would not be the envy of those with whom I work in downtown Jerusalem!

Put these things together, and you have little more than what people might put down to some Hebrew "artiste" doing his thing. Put those things together with his message, and you have something more potent. It took no small courage to bring a harsh, prophetic message to a community that hadn't heard one for centuries! Our people had grown

accustomed to words of comfort. And, I confess, I don't particularly like hellfire-and-brimstone sermons myself. I am of a more delicate, genteel disposition, so the thought of my father calling eminent clergy a "brood of vipers" is abhorrent to me.

However, my father was single-minded if he was anything. He told people to "bear fruit worthy of repentance," and he told them this whether they were peasant, priest or king! He was courageous, and though he came from a family with a long and prominent standing in the Hebrew community, he had no patience with those prone to rest on their ethnic laurels. "Do not presume," he said, "to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree...that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:9-10)

My father liked to call things the way he saw them, be it corruption, hypocrisy, or adultery! Like your own Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose independent spirit has withstood both the wealth of the West and Stalinist Gulag torture ("Alexander Solzhenitsyn's main foe is still the 'ruling class'," and "Solzhenitsyn snubs Russia's top cultural honour," *Ottawa Citizen*, December 12, 1998), my father would not kowtow to some tin despot, whatever the extent of his powers. Neither the might of Rome nor the avarice and political intrigue of Herod's court could co-opt him or deter him from what he felt to be right in the eyes of God.

A Robust Prophet

My father was a little rough around the edges. He was a little rough on people. My mother wasn't surprised when the present administration lost patience with him. I don't imagine my father was surprised; he could see Herod coming a mile away, but my father never deviated from his purpose: to prepare the our people for the long-awaited Messiah. If that meant prison, so be it. He wasn't about to lose his head—or actually, he was—over a little opposition!

Which brings me to your Gospel reading. My father was in prison when news reached him about our Cousin. My father sent some of his loyal supporters to our Cousin to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Now, I find it intriguing, and not a little amusing, that many of your modern commentators use this question to portray my father as some frustrated loser wracked by doubt and despair! They picture him as a lonely, broken man languishing in prison, staring certain death in the face and asking, in effect, "Has my work been futile? Are you the one or aren't you?!?"

Now, prison in our time was no picnic; it was, in reality, a filthy dungeon, but I don't believe for a minute that it broke my father. Like I said, he was a tough nut to crack. Our Cousin knew it, and he told my father's supporters, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matthew 11:4-5)

You have to remember that my father's mother, Elizabeth, and Mary knew each other very well. It was to my grandmother that Mary went when she was pregnant. My grandmother, who was pregnant with my father at the time, used to say that my father

leaped for joy in her womb when Mary came to visit. Some people have asked me if that was the last time my father expressed any joy, but it indicates that the fates of my father and his Cousin were inextricably linked, right from the beginning. They grew up together. They knew each other well. They grew up hearing the same Old Testament stories, stories of messianic release and redemption.

It's true that our Cousin was a little more polished than my father, ironic, really, when you consider that he grew up in the backwoods, while my father grew up in Jerusalem and chose the wilderness. And their ideas of what the Messiah would accomplish were somewhat different. I think my father would have preferred a Hebrew version of a Caesar—a powerful ruler bent on exterminating wickedness, removing all the political forces that restricted our freedom, and pouring out wrath on evildoers. Our Cousin was more compassionate. Oh, his remarks cut to the quick on more than one occasion, but he was not averse to meeting with the enemy. My father, for example, would never have countenanced a visit with Nicodemus. These are but differences of degree, however, and as for our cousin, it is a mistake to think that matters of peace and justice were of no interest to him.

I don't know how well you know the prophets, but when our Cousin sent word back to my father that the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and so on—all of the things included in his first public reading from the prophet Isaiah (61; cited in Luke 4)—he left out "release to the captives!" Our Cousin answered my father by referring to several things he had done that fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies, but he left out the very form of redemption that would have been of benefit to my father!

If you want my opinion, there was a little cousin-to-cousin chiding going on. I think my father, motivated not by doubt but rather by prophetic vision, was reminding our Cousin of the prophetic agenda that inspired them both. And I think our Cousin was saying, in effect, "Relax, John- John, we're right on schedule, and you know it, even if you have to rot in prison while you're waiting for it to happen!" Portraying my father as some wimp who needed assurance, someone to hold his hand, couldn't be further from the truth; he had far too robust a temperament for that.

A Robust Community with a Robust Hope

There were some who asked me, "If this really is the Messiah, then why is your father in gaol?" I know what my father would have said; he would have turned the question back on them, asking, "If he really takes the Messiah seriously, then why is your father not in gaol?" With all due respect, the question put to me is one heard far more often in your day. It's like asking, "How can I settle for a healing when what I want is a cure?" Well, I'm sorry, but you might get neither one! And is your faith sufficiently sturdy to deal with that? Many of your magazines have articles promising to help you cope with the disappointments of this Christmas season. Well, I'm sorry, but that's what Christmas is all about—the hope that transcends disappointment after disappointment after disappointment.

As for my father, he was a robust man, of robust faith, who came from a robust community with a robust hope, a community that had but to hear a few phrases from the prophet Isaiah and they were ready to endure another generation or two of suffering. Take the words of Isaiah you read this morning:

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing." (Isaiah 35:1-2)

"...waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water...." (35:6-7)

"And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (35:10) A bit too poetic for my tastes, for sorrow and sighing was about all they had at the time. All that Israel had hoped for was gone, but Isaiah's vision of a blooming desert was a call to reject the hopelessness brought about by the Exile. It called for those with "weak hands and feeble knees" to hold on to their hope! God would come to save them.

Never underestimate the power of poetry to encourage our Semitic spirit or any human soul, for that matter. It sustained us. Sustained us through years of waiting. My father may have complained of the unresponsive generation (Matthew 11:16-19) which he addressed, but his words struck a chord. The prophetic spirit runs too deep in our tradition that it cannot be reawakened with but a few lines prophetic poetry. The thread of hope runs too deep in our tradition that a few generations of oppression are going to sever it.

You have a children's book, "The Little Prince," in which the fox says to the Little Prince, "If you come at four o'clock, I shall begin to be happy at three o'clock." Such is the sustaining and inspiring nature of religious hope. The promise of fulfilment is enough in itself to bring forth joy.

Someone has called it the "prophetic imagination," an "alternative consciousness (which) serves to energize... communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move." (Walter Brueggemann) It's a powerful imagination, that endures beyond all reason. How else do you think my people could come out of four centuries of slavery in another country with our faith and identity intact? It's a powerful imagination that invites us to tap into a joyous hope in life, a hope and faith that barrenness does not last forever.

Someone has told me that in your own lifetime (May, 1980) one of the most picturesque spots on your continent was literally blown apart. A sleeping volcano woke up with a bang, and snow, ice and rock poured down the slope of Mt. St Helens at about 350 kilometres per hour. The explosion contained temperatures of 400 degrees and devastated everything in an area of 500 square kilometres. Old growth forests were wiped out in minutes. Instead of the green fields surrounding the mountain, the countryside was desolate and barren.

Your scientists said that life would one day return to the area, but it would take about fifty years. My people would not consider that a long period of time, but then we get our inspiration from prophets. Even so, it was only a matter of about five years before green signs of life were breaking through the gray of desolation on Mt St Helens. The area has regenerated many, many times faster than imagined possible.

Barrenness does not last forever; desolation will be removed; deserts will flower, in glorious colour. Weak hands are strengthened, feeble knees made firm, painful wounds healed, and fearful spirits become robust and strong as we wait patiently, and in hope, for the Lord's redemption.

December 13, 1998

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.