

ADVENT
CYCLES A, B, C

Advent, RIP

Advent, like Jacob Marley, is dead.

Advent has been swallowed up by commercial Christmas. No one really celebrates it anymore. Advent is not a byword. We come here to church to remember it, note the purple vestments, and sing the lovely Advent hymns but it evaporates the moment we leave church.

The Christmas flyers have long since arrived. TV is showing Christmas movies before November's turkey is being thought of. Black Friday steadily absorbs Thanksgiving. The stores are already aglitter with Christmas merchandise and Christmas music. My town already has its Christmas decorations up. A good number of houses in town are already decorated with Christmas lights and inflated cartoon icons. Christmas office parties have begun, school plays and festivals are in motion.

In a word commercial Christmas, well before Advent's arrival, has saturated the public square, luring us into secular festivity without the spiritual preparation of Advent. The truth is that, in reality, Advent exists only for the short time we are here in church, and even if we light our wreath at home or scan a daily meditation, we are inevitably pulled into commercial Christmas whether we like it or not. Especially if we have children who must be a part of Christmas or, these days, holiday activities.

So, I repeat: for all practical purposes, Advent is dead. There's no time before the birth of Jesus to look at those people who unknowingly were a part of the first drama,

people who could tell us so much about what happened back then or what it meant.

But at least, for our short time here today, we can go back to the era before the catalogs, Black Friday, online shopping, and artificial lights. Back then the only light would eventually be a star. Before that, a lot of darkness, and in that darkness are the stories of four people we will briefly look at. We know them as Mary of Nazareth, Joseph, also of Nazareth, Elizabeth of the far country, and the old widow, Anna of Jerusalem. Each one had a secret burden one way or another.

We begin with Mary. She was a young girl and she is suddenly, mysteriously scared out of her wits by a heavenly vision, a voice beyond a human voice, an unmistakable intrusion she could not fathom but could not deny.

If this voice were from some other place she had every right to be frightened, even if the voice were from God. Mary knew her tradition: to be confronted, called by God, was always scary, always dangerous. You never knew what this God would want. Whatever it was, the one thing Mary knew, it would be challenging. It would cost.

She knew the stories of Abraham who hesitated; Moses who begged off saying, "Call my brother Aaron, he's a better speaker"; Isaiah, who asked the Lord, "Have you noticed? I stutter! Call someone else"; Jonah who said, "No Way!" and then he ran the other way—they all knew of the danger and they each asked to be excused. "No, not me . . . find someone else" was their common plea. Mary knew that.

So, she was scared. The angelic Messenger understood that and so immediately said, "Do not be afraid." Then he gave his message, but she became even more afraid on hearing it. Could she handle this call to be mother of the Messiah? How would it all happen? What about her parents, the neighbors? What about Joseph?

It was a long and lonely pause. Then she said yes to God. "Be it done unto me according to your word," and her life moved in a direction of which she never dreamed.

Mary is the Advent person for the invitationally challenged, for those hesitant to say yes to God's call to a different life, a fuller and deeper life beyond image,

beyond looking out for Number 1, or who want the joy of yes but not its cost. Mary encourages us to say yes to the Lord, and to walk with her during Advent.

Then there is cousin Elizabeth, the deprived one as we might call her, the marginalized. Why did God do this to her: close her womb in a society that highly prized children, who gave her status, acceptance, and a common bond and respect with the other women of her village? Instead everyone could clearly see she was cursed by God: no children, no grandchildren for her old age. It's hard to be different, an outsider, out of the loop, folding dishtowels when others were folding diapers. She was different, seemingly passed over by God, surviving on the margins and she had to live with it.

What was wrong with her? Didn't God love her?

Until one latecomer day she felt a stirring in her body, and that same day cousin Mary came to visit and suddenly two women—both sterile, one by choice and the other by nature—celebrated God's breaking into their lives. She knew then that even if everyone else dismissed her, she had been noticed, she was noticed by the One who counts.

Elizabeth tells us shadowed people that no matter what the emptiness or how sidelined and unpopular we are, *we* are noticed by God. She would tell us to keep faith with our tradition. Read the scriptures. Worship in community. Give alms. God will break into our lives. Elizabeth gives us Advent hope.

Joseph. What can we say about him except that he always seems to be left out? His favorite question is, "What's going on around here? I'm the last person to know." He listens, overhears whispers and conversations that are recorded, and he winds up with not one word in the gospel accounts—or anywhere else for that matter. The silent man. The perennially perplexed. The lost soul. The overlooked.

Even later in those fabulous Renaissance paintings, he's always in the background or off center. The lighting, the spotlight, is always on Mary and Jesus. The forgotten man, the man in the dark. But it is in that darkness that he discovers he was to be one of those special quiet people who make a difference, who remain faithful and

obeys even when he does not understand. Yes, faithful, loyal Joseph and those like him who are the context in which great things happen even if they have no clue. For some, he's a good sturdy companion for Advent. *Be a context for great things*, Joseph tells us.

Finally, there is Anna, the old woman, who went daily to the Temple in the hope she might see the Messiah before she dies. She is a woman who knows loss. She lost her husband, and some children. Celebrating Passover will be hard this year because her husband's gone. She has a heavy heart. So many memories!

She's old now and her faith and hope have ebbed. She lives in constant doubt. All those promises too long unfulfilled, all that waiting for the Messiah was a waste of time. She's seen too much tragedy, too much innocent suffering, too many unanswered prayers, too much of God's absence.

But her moment came. Despite dryness of heart, she went to the Temple every day and this day, this special day, she got to look into the face of the Messiah. Her lesson is to remain faithful in spite of doubt, in spite of loss. Keep faith with the community. Those of you for whom Christmas will be hard this year because you have lost a loved one, remember Anna as she will remember you.

These are some of the people who can focus our Advent in the midst of entertaining distraction. I suggest that you take one of them home with you. Even though you and I will be assaulted by commercial Christmas as soon as we leave here, in our hearts let us walk with Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, or Anna as a little reminder of what the season really is all about. To that extent, dead Advent can live again in our lives and in our hearts.

2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

CYCLE B

MARK 1:1-8

Comfort My People

Today's first reading opens with the prophet Isaiah's majestic words, "Comfort, give comfort to my people' says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . ."

So I thought that today, this second Sunday of Advent, I would indeed speak tenderly to you; that is, share a woman's true story that will convey to us a sense of why we prepare to celebrate Christmas. She speaks:

One minute I was a 31-year-old part-time music teacher. The next moment, I turned into one of my pre-K students, hyperventilating and sobbing uncontrollably, wishing that Mom and Dad would come to rescue me.

That's what claustrophobia will do to you.

My parents were at home on Long Island, though, and here I was trapped in an elevator in a Manhattan high-rise. All alone. This was exactly what I'd been afraid of when my best friend asked me to come see her new apartment. Unless I wanted to climb fifteen flights of stairs, this metal coffin was my only way up. So, I said a prayer and went for it. I was doing okay . . . until the elevator car jerked and then came to a halt—between floors! I tried taking deep breaths. Feeling faint, I sank to the floor and tucked my head between my knees and closed my eyes.

Maybe because the next day was Father's Day, I thought back to how Dad had comforted me when I was a little girl. "Catch the kiss!" he'd say as he puckered up his lips, blew a kiss and then laughed as I ran around the room, grabbing handfuls of air trying to hold onto the invisible. Had I ever

told him what those moments meant to me? Now I might never get the chance. Not if I suffocated to death in this elevator, or if the cable snapped and I plummeted to my death.

I opened my eyes. Blinking away my tears, I spied a little door below the button panel. *Emergency phone!* Thank God! I snatched up the receiver, "I'm stuck in here!" I cried in panic. "Get me out, please!"

"We're working on it, Ma'am," a voice responded.

"I know you're upset, but the longer we stay on the phone, the longer it will take to free you." I hung up immediately.

Trying to dry my tears, I rummaged through my purse for a tissue. My hand bumped into something hard. It was the mini tape recorder I used for my classes. "Make this time count", I thought. "If I don't make it, at least tell everyone you love what you've always wanted to tell them." I held the microphone to my lips and pressed *Record*. I started with Dad.

"Dad, I remember you at the playground, how you stood at the end of the giant blue slide waiting to catch me. I'm all grown up now, but I continue to count on you to be there for me when I'm scared. You never let me down. In my mind, you'll always be the giant that met me at the bottom of that slide, and I'll always be your little girl. Happy Father's Day, Dad, I love you."

Suddenly, *clang!* What was that? The cable snapping? A panicked heartbeat later, the elevator doors slid open. An emergency worker was there. I nearly leaped into his arms. He looked me over and led me downstairs to the lobby. I buzzed my friend's apartment. She came down. "I'm sorry," she said. "But, really, what were the odds that this would happen to you, of all people?"

I told my parents about this whole frightful episode when I saw them on Father's Day. Then I handed Dad my gift. He looked confused. "A tape recorder?" he asked. "Just press *Play*," I said. He listened to my elevator message. "This is the best gift you could have given me," he said. Now he was the one blinking away tears. Little did I know at the time that it would be our last Father's Day together. Dad was soon diagnosed with leukemia and succumbed swiftly.

It took a while before I could bring myself to sort through the bag of belongings he'd brought with him to the hospital: some magazines, his father's watch. But at the bottom of the bag I was startled to find the tape recorder I'd given him. I rewound the tape and pressed *Play*.

That time in the elevator had been terrifying. But it had given me the chance to tell Dad how I felt before it was too late. I thought of my words comforting him in his final days the way he had always comforted me. Thank you, Lord, for that.

My old elevator message ended. I was about to turn it off when I heard the sound of someone clearing his throat. It was Dad's voice steady and clear.

"Dear Princess. When you find this recording, I will no longer be here. Know that I love you more than life itself. You are the greatest blessing a father could hope for. When you close your eyes, listen for my voice and know that you are never alone. I am with you always." Just before the recording clicked off, I heard the unmistakable sound of him blowing a kiss. I reached up with both hands and clasped them together in the air, catching something invisible, something that had never felt more real."

It's not too hard to imagine that this woman's story is the Advent story in another guise, which means it is the story of us: a people sometimes in the dark, sometimes stuck between the floors of our life in what she calls a metal coffin—what we call a spiritual, social, emotional coffin—waiting and yearning for salvation and, while waiting, desperately clinging to Isaiah's promised words of comfort.

I suggest that her father's words are those words of comfort.

"Know that I love you . . . You are my greatest blessing. Close your eyes and listen to my voice and know that you are never alone. I am with you always."

These are Advent-like words that are the heart and soul of Christmas. At the beginning of the gospel, they come from the mouth of the angel Gabriel who described the savior-to-come as Emmanuel which, he says, means 'God with us'; they also come at the end of the gospel when Jesus says, "I am with you all days, even to the end of time."

Advent is promise. Christmas is fulfillment. With our story in mind, let's keep on singing with confidence, "O come, O come Emmanuel."

3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

CYCLE B

JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

3

ADVENT - CHRISTMAS

John's Question, Jesus' Answer

John the Baptist.

John the forerunner, the voice crying in the wilderness, the one who prepares the way for some other whose sandal strap, he says, he is not worthy to tie; John the baptizer who calls the people, the soldiers, the Pharisees, to repentance. He is forceful and fascinating, popular and feared. He even catches the attention of superstitious King Herod who was anxious one day to meet him. He is riding high, confident, sure of himself.

But, as happens to us all, especially in midlife, one day, John's fortunes begin to turn. He's caught up in the politics of those who do not want to repent, whose vested interests he has hurt, and eventually finds himself in Herod's dreaded prison fortress of Machaerus that overlooks the city of Jerusalem.

There he has enough time in that rat-infested hole to think, to feel sorry for himself, to wonder if it was all worthwhile. After all his preaching, all his calls to repentance, all his fierce dedication, all his ultimate acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah, he begins to have his doubts. The dream begins to fade.

So much so, you recall from hearing or reading in the gospels, that he sends two of his disciples to find Jesus and ask him outright, "Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?"