

The Sunday Missive – December 17, 2023

The Third Sunday in Advent

Hymn 72 Hark! The glad sound! The Savior comes

Hark, the glad sound! the Savior comes, the Savior promised long;
Let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song.

He comes, the prisoners to release in Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield.

He comes, the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure;
And with the treasures of his grace to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, thy welcome shall proclaim;
And heaven's eternal arches ring with thy beloved Name.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KppZkeJD6k&t=123s>

Hymn 56 O Come O come Emmanuel

O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Bright and Morning Star, and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night and turn our darkness into light.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

The Collect of the Day

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and,
because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace
and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and
for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

The Song of Mary *Magnificat*

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord* ***My spirit rejoices in God my Savior***

For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant* ***From this day all generations will call me blessed.***

The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name* ***He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.***

He has shown the strength of his arm* ***He has scattered the proud in their conceit.***

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones* ***And has lifted up the lowly.***

He has filled the hungry with good things* ***The rich he has sent empty away.***

He has come to the help of his servant Israel* ***For he remembers his promise of mercy.***

The promise he made to our ancestors* ***To Hagar and Sarah and their children forever.***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E48tDob8jtM>

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

74 Blest be the King whose coming

Blest be the King whose coming is in the name of God!
For him let doors be opened, no hearts against him barred!
Not robed in royal splendor, in power and pomp, comes he;
But clad as are the poorest, such his humility!

Blest be the King whose coming is in the name of God!
By those who truly listen his voice is truly heard;
Pity the proud and haughty, who have not learned to heed
The Christ who is the Promise, who has atonement made.

Blest be the King whose coming is in the name of God!
He offers to the burdened the rest and grace they need.
Gentle is he and humble! And light his yoke shall be,
For he would have us bear it so he can make us free.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8lpK1rcq7A>

John 1:6-8,19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

One Day It Came to Pass – Advent 3B

Each of us has a call from God. This call is an essential element of what it means to be human. No one exists now, or has ever existed, for whom God does not have a purpose. But we go on praying that God's

will may be done on earth – as it is in heaven – because God leaves us free to choose the response we make to that universal call.

We are not simply tools to be made use of, for like God Almighty we have wills of our own. God calls, but we do not always listen. Which is to say, benevolence is possible, whatever our condition; whether or not we value it is up to us. Perhaps we do not expect the cosmos to be concerned with us. That is to disregard the call because we refuse to recognize it. Perhaps we are so concerned with our own interests that we are quite unable to perceive anything else. That would be to deny the call because we prefer to listen to someone else. Perhaps we fail to listen to God's call because we have selected a vocation for ourselves without stopping to think whether or not it is a good use of our gifts or beneficial to Creation.

But we must never delude ourselves into thinking that our lives have no purpose or that our response to God's call is insignificant. At no point in history has this been more true, with religion being coopted by seriously non-religious powermongers, hate groups and fearmongers both at home and abroad. These are individuals and organizations and corporate entities whose intentions and behaviors bear no discernable resemblance to the teachings of the figures they claim to represent. Of no one is this more true than co-called Christians. Nowhere is this more true than in our nation. And no supposedly religious tradition has been more warped and commercialized than Christmas. At the very least, each of us is called to examine ourselves according to this truth, and ask ourselves what it means to get ready for Christmas.

John the Baptizer is preeminent among those who did listen to God's call. He was to be, and he was a messenger of God; and he was good at it. As we ourselves consider facing the discipline of contemplation -- the contemplation of God's immediate presence this Advent season, there can be no more important model than John, whose certainty was that his own call was to witness to the coming of God among us.

This is Advent preparation at its best. Like John, we are challenged to prepare ourselves – and as much of our world as we can reach – for

the coming of Jesus the Christ, whose insistent teaching advocated acceptance of all, support for the weak, welcome for the stranger, renunciation of violence and simplicity of life. Our most exalted function is to make ready for the decisive invasion of God into our lives and our world by pruning away “second things,” in preparation for the “First Thing.” As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from the concentration camp in which he would be killed by not-neo-Nazis, “It may be that the Day of Judgement will dawn tomorrow. If that happens, we shall gladly stop working for a better future, but not before.”

An advent is an arrival, a coming. The promise of Advent is that what is coming is an unimaginable mystical arrival. The mythology of our age has to do with flying saucers and invasions from outer space and that is unimaginable enough. But what is upon us now is even wilder: A close encounter, not of the third kind, but of a different kind altogether, an invasion of holiness. As Frederick Buechner put it, “It is like the hush in a theater just before the curtain rises. It is like the hazy ring around the winter moon that means the coming of snow that will turn the night into silver.”

We can say that all action ends at the onset of passion, because then the response to our action is out of our hands. That is the mystery of work, the mystery of love, the mystery of friendship, the mystery of community; they always involve waiting for a response. And that is the mystery of Jesus’ love. God is revealed in Jesus as the one who waits for our response. Precisely in that waiting is the intensity of God’s love revealed to us. If God forced us to love, we would not really be loving.

But we must pay attention to our experience. As Paul says, we must check it, examine it, contemplate it and learn from it. The expectation of Advent is that the divine will be present among us. The more we come in touch with what happened in the past, the more we come in touch with what is to come. The Gospel – just as the prophecy of Isaiah – not only reminds us of what took place, but also of what will take place. In the contemplation of Christ’s first coming, we can discover the signs of Christ’s coming again. By looking back in meditation, we can look forward in expectation. Hate-mongering, oppressive policies, callous disregard for the poor and other forms of demagoguery have never worked before, nor will a society that

condones or employs them ever be decent and flourish. Yet all too many of us tolerate, even welcome these toxins.

The most remarkable quality of Mary's song is that the justice God will bring to pass – the bringing down of the proud and the oppressor, the exalting of those who have been disenfranchised, disregarded and dismissed – is spoken of in the past tense: Has shown strength, has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful, has lifted up the lowly, has filled the hungry and has sent the rich empty away. Why the past tense? As we know from reading the newspaper, these things have not yet occurred. 41 million Americans live in poverty. 41 million out of 323 million, that's 13 percent.

We know these conditions are not yet, but the faithful must express our trust in God by speaking of the future as if it were already here, while behaving as if it depends on our every thought, word and deed to come about. Such faith is prerequisite to being a participant in efforts to achieve that future. To celebrate the future as a memory, to praise God for having already done what lies before us to do – this is the way of the people of God. Without this song of praise, the noblest efforts to effect justice in society become arrogant projects, messianic moves by one group against another, competing for camera time. God's people parade before we march, for history teaches us that, without the parade, the great walk on the straight highway in the desert, the march itself can all too easily become lockstep – even goosestep. And then, who will remain to say, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Who will remain to contemplate? Our time, our nation, our village, our congregation is the little town where the hopes and fears of all the years are met tonight; may we think no less of ourselves; may we contemplate no less as our call.

O Lord, we are caught in that moment of half-light, the breathless point of balance between sun and moon. As we bid farewell to the cold purification of the night, in that same movement, we fling wide our arms to be embraced by the warmth and glory of the sun, knowing that, in due time we will bow the receding light and open our arms to darkness once again. Meanwhile, grant us the serenity to accept that all things are changeable with you, the wisdom to hear our call in the changing, and the courage to answer you with all our hearts. Amen.

Hymn 640 Watchman, tell us of the night

Watchman, tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are.
Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height, see that glory-beaming star.
Watchman, does its beauteous ray aught of joy or hope foretell?
Traveler, yes; it brings the day, promised day of Israel.

Watchman, tell us of the night; higher yet that star ascends.
Traveler, blessedness and light, peace and truth its course portends.
Watchman, will its beams alone gild the spot that gave them birth?
Traveler, ages are its own; see, it bursts o'er all the earth.

Watchman, tell us of the night, for the morning seems to dawn.
Traveler, darkness takes its flight, doubt and terror are withdrawn.
Watchman, let thy wanderings cease; hie thee to thy quiet home.
Traveler, lo! the Prince of Peace, lo! the Son of God is come!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06t1555Cn5U>

Hymn 444 Blessed be the God of Israel

Blessed be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free;
Who visits and redeems us, who grants us liberty.
The prophets spoke of mercy, of freedom and release;
God shall fulfill that promise and bring the people peace.

God from the house of David a child of grace has given;
A Savior comes among us to raise us up to heaven.
Before him goes the herald, forerunner in the way,
The prophet of salvation, the harbinger of day.

On those who sit in darkness the sun begins to rise,
The dawning of forgiveness upon the sinner's eyes.
God guides the feet of pilgrims along the paths of peace.
O bless our God and Savior with songs that never cease!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzbpB1n3OHM>

Never Yet Been Spoken

I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.
I want to free what waits within me
so that what no one has dared to wish for

may for once spring clear
without my contriving.

If this is arrogant, God, forgive me,
but this is what I need to say.
May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.

Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
these deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,

streaming through widening channels
into the open sea.

Rainer Maria Rilke