

EASY TO MISS

When I was younger, I was often appalled at how quickly the world moved from Thanksgiving Day to Christmas mood and decoration. And the first time I saw Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving Day itself, I was irate. Since that time, I have come to realize that there is no official book of rules on the subject. *Where* I acquired my notions of the proper break between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I don't even remember. Perhaps it is a holdover from Puritan tradition, which established Thanksgiving and outlawed any celebration of Christmas, period. In any case, the first Sunday of Advent always comes three days after Thanksgiving Day. And for Christians, it is a natural flow from a general thanksgiving to that for which we are most grateful of all. If that is not what the secular world always means to be proclaiming, nevertheless I am more and more content to let it be about its business, as long as it lets us be about ours.

And what is our business? "To live good moral and ethical lives," some have said. Well, that is a pretty good idea for anybody, but hardly enough to get us converted. "To help, insofar as we are able, those less fortunate than ourselves," others have said. No time today to discuss who is less fortunate, or on what basis, or how we try to help them. In any case, that is far from the central meaning of the Christian Faith. Deeds of mercy and caring spill over as a response to our encounter with Christ, but they are not the main event.

No, Jesus came proclaiming new lives for old – even for us. The offer is for New Life here: light where there was darkness; faith where there was fear; hope where there was despair; meaning and purpose where, before, things seemed to be run by random choice or, worse, by some evil force. Have you forgotten what it was like to see life laced everywhere with greed and malice; the lust for power; the compulsive race for pleasure or recognition that turns even beautiful things into something sick and wrong? Do you remember Stalin? Hitler? For every saint or hero you truly honor, can you not name a person so crass and cruel that it is difficult to imagine that they were really human? What did they think they were trying to accomplish? And have you never been heartsick to recognize in yourself, at least in some ways, the very seeds of what you see in them?

I am amazed at the *casualness* with which so many of us approach our New Life in Christ Jesus. It's almost as if we have little concern about which side we are really on. Or maybe worse, as if we have not fully realized that there really are issues here: a life-and-death struggle going on that really is about more than who we marry, what we eat, how much money we make, or how we spend Friday night.

But it is only the beginning of Advent, and I am much too quickly into what it is really about. Let us pretend a little longer that it is all very casual and ordinary, and that we have all the time in the world – at least until we get our bearings. You know, “advent” is an interesting word. In one sense, it refers to a period of time. Even more, it refers to a process that takes place between the “departure” and the “arrival.” Advent means *the coming*.

I can remember as a little boy having a lot of trouble with this concept. It was hard for me to understand that we could leave our house with every intention of being somewhere else, and still take a long, long time to get there. It was especially hard not to keep asking, “Are we almost there, Daddy?” “No. Not for a long time yet. Be patient. Stop asking me every three minutes.”

It was even harder to realize that the same thing was true of those coming to visit us. Such visits were always preceded by certain preparations in which all of us took part – mowing the lawn, sweeping the walks, vacuuming, cooking, and so on. I can remember the feeling of panic when someone would mention, “Well, they are on the way now” – and my jobs were only half finished! A half-finished job was no joke, in my childhood. Then Mother would say, “It's okay, they won't be here for another three hours.” How was that possible?! They were on the way, but they would not arrive for three hours? Something must be really wrong with them. (Nobody had helped me to understand yet that there really is something very wrong with us: we are finite creatures and terribly limited by time and space.)

I still know a number of full-grown adults who have never been able to comprehend this principle. They are perennially late because they cannot comprehend that it takes *time* to get from one place to another. Perhaps this is a lingering shadow-memory, or perhaps a precursor, of another realm where departure and arrival are instantaneous. And supposedly the angels in that other realm are never late. But some of the

angels in *this* realm are always late because they cannot get used to the idea that they have not yet come into their full powers.

In any case, things do not just happen in this world willy-nilly, instantaneously, or without preparation. For every EVENT, there is an ADVENT. Plans must be made. Preparations must be carried out. We must get ready for the event, or the arrival spells chaos, and sometimes disaster. Most often, if we do not get ready to perceive and receive, the event itself passes us by. We may hear the noise and see the activity, and maybe even be right in the middle of where it is all happening, but the event itself will pass us by.

I never knew any of my grandparents. One grandmother came for a visit once. I did not know at the time that it would only be once. I also did not understand what “grandmother” meant. She stayed for several days, I am told, but I never knew her. I cannot remember her voice, or her face, or a single thing she ever said. I missed it – the event passed me by.

Do we miss most things? Or do we perceive and receive most of what is really happening? Which is the exception, and which is the rule? So much goes on all around us, and much of the time we seem only partially awake. Even the great events are easy to miss. All through history, the great events have been missed by all but a handful of people. We have to read history books to find out which events were really important. Only a few perceive or receive what is going on at the time. Only a few know the secret of Advent: there must be preparation, awareness, a readiness to receive – or it passes us by.

Officially, Advent is four weeks to get ready to perceive and receive Christmas – the coming of the Messiah. On reflection, we realize that God’s preparations took longer – millions of years. We do not identify very easily until it gets to things we understand. But we see now that God was making Christmas preparations when he started talking with Abraham four thousand years ago. God was already hanging lights with Jacob and Joseph. God was playing special Christmas music with Moses and David. God was wrapping presents with Isaiah and Jeremiah and whoever in the world wrote Jonah. For two thousand years, God was sending Christmas cards about this coming, and for at least seven hundred years, people talked about getting ready, about how eager they were, and about the Great Day – the Day of the Messiah’s coming. And they kept praying, “Are we almost there, Daddy?”

You know what happened. When it came, most folk missed it. They thought it would be automatic. They thought it would be easy for them to turn and catch it whenever it came. They had not made the necessary preparations. And the truth is – as with all things high and holy – it is easy to miss. (Something about, “*Straight is the way, and narrow the gate that leads to life, and few there be who find it.*” (Matthew 7:13))

There are so many other things going on. Pictures to take, presents to buy, money to make, people to see, things to do. Time goes by and the lamps burn low, and we get to thinking that it will not happen in such a humdrum time, or anywhere close to us. Then a strange light from the sky, and a flurry of a different kind of excitement. But we are in the middle of tasks and plans of our own. We scurry and hurry to finish up what we are doing, for after all, it must be done. Then we turn to see what the strange new light was. But all is quiet again, except for the normal noise of the way of the world. The Messiah comes to tell us that the Holy Spirit is always coming – coming to people in all ages and places. Christmas comes to tell us that Christmas is always coming. But it is easy to miss.

The trouble with God is that God does not understand our attention span. Or maybe God simply chooses not to recreate the world to match our lack of discipline and training. We can hardly fathom staying alert for four weeks, never mind two thousand years. Sometimes on the tennis court, I cannot stay focused for two minutes, even when that is the very thing I think I am trying to do. This business of faithful waiting: year after year; in season and out of season; trying to stay spiritually aware; learning to pray day after day; seeking the will of the Holy Spirit in all that we do – how unreasonable! We simply are not built that way. But God just laughs and says, “*Tell me* all about how you were built! You may not like to admit that you are Spirit-beings, but you are. If I tried to come to you like you think you want me to, it would destroy you. Besides, I am not calling you to a one-day party. I am calling you into an Eternal Kingdom! The Advent must match the Event.”

The Gospel of John does not understand any of it in terms of four weeks, or four thousand years either. It just nods its head quietly and says, “*In the beginning was the Word ...*” From the beginning it was intended. In the end, God will bring it to completion. But coming or going, Jesus is at the center of it. Jesus is the event that breaks us into LIFE. Even so, it is easy to miss.

Humankind will reenact the drama of Christmas again this year. That is, it will come and go, and most folk will miss it. But God does not call it off. God enters the world with the same purpose that was from the beginning. God does not alter the purpose or change the plan according to how many people comprehend it. We are invited to notice if we will, to understand if we want to, to participate if we are willing. God comes into the world, and most folk go on about their business. Yet God goes on about God's business too: the redemption of Life – a Savior, for those who will perceive and receive.

Perhaps some people are sitting here today wondering about their career. They would like it if God would help them with that. They are not very interested in Advent unless they can see some connection between Advent and their career.

Others are concerned with their health, or perhaps with the health of a loved one. They feel the same way: if Advent could promise some sure and immediate answers to health issues, they would be most interested.

Still others are concerned with education, or the family; about friends they have, or want to have; about worries large and small – personal, or involving the whole society. What do we care whether or not some Word became flesh? What do we care about what happened to that flesh so many long years ago? We are alive *today*, with little time and less patience for whatever theories may have seemed important to shepherds and fishermen of a bygone age. Have you ever felt that way?

I have been in conversations about “relevance” for a lot of years now. “Why waste time on the church, when it's clear that we live in a post-Christian era? The church won't even be around by the next generation.” That was back in the '60s. Time and time again, I have watched the Christian Faith outlast what people were telling me was relevant. This has been going on for many generations now. Humans do not always have great perspective. God coming into the world and inviting us into a different WAY of Life – that is going to lose its luster, go out of date, become old hat? I don't think so. But some humans will always be thinking so. It merely reveals how much we need God to come into our world.

John believed in CHRISTMAS. Not the kind *we* celebrate – *that* had not been invented yet. John believed that GOD HAD COME INTO THE WORLD – God had revealed himself, his purpose, and his true nature in Jesus Christ. By that faith, John proclaimed his belief in Life's potential.

In Jesus of Nazareth, “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” And “*Those who believe in Him are given the power to become children of God.*” For John, Life’s potential had gone off the map. Suddenly it was unlimited – there was no ceiling. The love and power of God were so great that no matter how much you believed, you could not overreach God’s greatness. In one sense, you could believe as much as you were able to grasp and it would be true for you, because your mind could not exceed God’s greatness.

It is as if God gave us a blank check and said, “Write in the highest amount you can honestly dare to believe is possible.” Then God made good on whatever we wrote in. Only, people kept writing-in such paltry amounts. They kept settling for such meager lives that it wasn’t any fun for God. God, after all, is a Great Giver! It was irritating and insulting how little most people wanted from God. So down through the ages, God kept needling people: “Come on, add a few zeros on the end of it!” A few folk added one or two, and God made payment: You want the fleece wet, or dry? Okay. You want a code to live by? Okay. You want the Promised Land? Okay. You want out of the belly of the great fish and back on dry land? Okay. Even so, most folk were so afraid, they couldn’t even hang on to what had already been given. And always God waits for the smile of understanding to light our faces, but it rarely comes.

Finally, God turned to his Son, and said, “We are never going to get anywhere at this rate. Somebody is going to have to go down there and show those people how to make the mark for infinity.” There was a nod ... and Advent began.

How much life do we have to carry in order to survive? How much soul can we leave lying dormant and still get by? It is easy to miss, but that misses the point. How much are you *worthy* to receive? How much do you *deserve* to put down on that blank check? It is easy to miss, but that *really* misses the whole point! How much are you *worth* to the people around you? How much can you *accomplish* for their benefit? Should that not govern the amount you can write in? That is what most folk – even most of you – still believe. But it misses the point of Christmas.

What a paltry, cheap, and stingy little festival we have turned Christmas into – at least in comparison to what really happened. It is no good just hearing words about Infinite Life or Infinite Love or Infinite Joy. We have to put it back up to God: make some sign that we are

responding – that we are daring to believe what God has done. Get out your pen and start adding zeros. If you are not playing games, God will make payment on whatever you write on that blank check of LIFE – because that is the kind of God that God is.

Somebody told you Christmas was for children? Fine. Then start acting like children – God’s children. What kind of stingy, inept, uncaring Heavenly Father do you think you’ve got?

I cannot say it as well as John, but maybe I can get you to think about what John said. Let us try.

Even before our world was made, life had meaning. The secret of the goal and completion of life was with God, because the secret was God: the awareness of God; being with God; the experience of God – life with God.

Everything that was ever created was made with this purpose in mind. And nothing exists which is by nature opposed to this purpose. Everything in life, if rightly understood and rightly used, will contribute to the revealing and the bringing of the meaning God has for us.

Yet the goal itself is still unfulfilled in us, and therefore its proclamation is like a great beacon – a light shining in the darkness.

A ray of this very light – a person in whom the meaning was fulfilled – was coming into the world. Even though He was what the people of the world were created to be like, yet most people thought Him weird and hard to get along with. They did not recognize in Him their true destiny. Even though He knew and illustrated the secret they were all looking for, yet they could not believe it was really possible, and so they rejected Him.

But a few there were who looked more closely, and saw the longing of their own souls answered in this man and the life He lived. To those few – and to all those who will ever look more closely and believe what they see – He gives power to become what they are created and intended to be – children of God.

For this very reason, the meaning and life God intended from the beginning took shape and form and became a man, and lived among us.

No one has ever seen God, and all the rules and laws we make do not help us to approach the true design that God has for us. But Jesus Christ, the man of love, has revealed it to us – He has opened the WAY and made it available to us.

I repeat, John says it better. But it is now so familiar that many do not stop to think much about what it means.

“Are we almost there, Daddy?” That was old Simeon’s question, and Anna’s. That was the question of the wise men, and of John the Baptist. Only this time, the answer came back “YES! The time is here. It is now happening in your realm, and before your very eyes.” But it is easy to miss. And most of the world keeps riding right on by.

What do you really want? Do you know yet? Do you dare yet to believe that God wants LIFE for you, and will come through with as much of it as you can genuinely ask for – with as much as you are willing to receive? What do you actually expect to receive from God today? Will you dare to take it down out of the “religious” plane, and clarify in God’s presence what it is that you are really seeking?

“New lives for old!” That is what God offers – and what God places on the altar for us. There is no ceiling and no limit on it. It is Advent. He is coming – coming to teach us how to make the mark for infinity.