

Waiting in the Dark

When you listen to today's gospel lesson, you get the sense that John the Baptist anticipated that best seller from a few years back.

Setting aside the "brood of vipers!" harangue and all that talk about axes, the advice John gives is the same advice given by that very popular book: "Everything I Ever Needed To Know I Learned in Kindergarten."

As soldiers and tax collectors and ordinary folks come asking him what they should do, John tells them, one after the other: to share, be fair, and don't be a bully.

These really are very basic skills we all need to get along with one another.

What you might find surprising is what John doesn't say.

He doesn't talk about attending church, he doesn't talk about following particular religious doctrines, he doesn't say folks have to believe this or that.

In fact, John's "spiritual advice" is very down to earth.

"Share, be fair, and don't be a bully."

These are basic rules, and they are the beginning, but not the end of the journey.

It's like the young college student who rushes up to the religion professor after class and yells:

"Do I have to believe in the virgin birth in order to believe in Jesus?!"

"The professor replies, 'In one sense no, but in another sense, yes, you do.'"

"If you think the virgin giving birth is a tough one, try: 'love your enemy; forgive every time you are asked for forgiveness; and, trust in God rather than in military might.'"

"You see, the professor explained, 'we start you off on the easier truths, like the virgin birth, and then move to the harder truths: truths like, the poor and the outcast are God's royalty while the rich and successful are in big trouble. W. Willimon.

So it is with John.

Before we can move on to the hard stuff: giving up in order to receive; dying in order to live; taking up the cross as the way to follow Jesus, it helps to be acquainted with the easier things like: share, be fair, and don't bully.

Sadly, we can't even talk about kindergarten today without mourning the senseless slaughter that occurred on Friday in a small elementary school in Connecticut.

For reasons that probably went with him to his grave, a young man murdered 27 people, 20 of whom were children, one of whom was his own mother.

How do we respond to such tragedy?

What does our faith say to such a horror?

What Advent hope is to be found in that darkness?

I visited a friend this week who's struggling with a serious, perhaps life-threatening, illness.

This friend spoke of the darkness of Advent, and the surprise that Advent should be this time of darkness.

My friend wasn't talking about the days getting shorter.

It's that the season of Advent ignores the bright Christmas lights that seem to be lit right after Halloween.

Instead,
this friend noticed,
Advent takes us by the hand
and
marches headlong into the darkness of our world,
into the darkness of our lives;
all as a way of helping us prepare to meet the Lord:
who,
we discover,
is a God who meets us far more often in what seems to be
darkness;
yet who,
in time,
somehow,
and most surprisingly,
transforms that darkness
into a light that is full of tenderness and compassion.

Last week we spoke of metanoia.

What we didn't speak of is what a messy process metanoia is.

It's the caterpillar being transformed into a butterfly – which is a process that is anything but sweet or sentimental.

Cut open a cocoon sometime and what you will find is not a caterpillar sprouting wings – oh no -- you will find black mush –

the same mush that we feel like halfway through our own transformations.

The darkness that pervades the Advent season is not an unusual observation for those who are paying attention – Advent is, especially compared to our over-charged, extra-loud, buying spree society -- fueled by credit cards and vodka—Advent is a deeply contrary time.

The killings in Connecticut only sharpen that point.

And yet, in Jesus, we are assured that God is a God who knows intimately the agony of suffering and loss, who doesn't avoid suffering or loss, but who goes straight into it: first by welcoming the unwelcome, by accepting the unacceptable, by rejecting the pious platitudes of the big-shots, and then, because we insist upon it, by opening his arms on the cross.

In a few days, John the Baptist will send messengers from his stinking cell in Herod's dungeon to ask Jesus if he is the one, or are we to wait for another....

John perhaps is wondering if that axe he saw in his vision might come and take a swing at the lock on his prison door – might bring some light into his very dark situation.

But that is not how the one we are waiting for gets things done.

John, like you and I, perhaps like most folks confronting life's fragility, life's vulnerability, John has hopes for a holy way out of suffering, a holy way out of the hard work that relationships require; a holy way out of life too often savage and cruel; a holy way out of aging or illness; a holy way out of a society that worships instruments of violence like handguns with so much pious devotion.

The one who is to come shows us that there is no holy way out.

Instead, he says, "Follow me in."

"Into the cell, into the crosshairs, onto the cross: follow me in."

"If you want to get out," Jesus says gently but firmly, "come in."

It seems we come into utter wilderness when we follow Jesus in.

A wilderness that is desolate and frightening and so terribly lonely.

But that is *not* where our story ends.

For this same wilderness will one day bloom!

"[W]aters 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...."

Zephaniah hears God's promise to:

"save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and ... change their shame into praise...
At that time I will bring you home, says the LORD,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes."

Isaiah joins Zephaniah as he insists that:

"Surely, it is God who saves me;
I will trust in him and not be afraid.
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,
and he is my Savior."

With parents and siblings in mourning this day, not only in Connecticut, but in Syria, in Afghanistan, and in the Congo, with the loss and despair we come face to face with in our own lives, we are nevertheless beckoned to come and see that it is **our** wilderness that will bloom, precisely because the life of Jesus is the first fruit of that blooming.

What has first touched only one, will redeem all; what lasted for only a little while, will go on and on forever and ever!

This is the promise of Advent, a promise made in the midst of so much darkness.

In this promise is our hope!

Sitting in John's cell, or sitting in your own hospital bed, or sitting in horrified despair as young lives are so needlessly snuffed out, it sometimes seems there is no way out.

Yet ours is a God who is a master at making a way out of no way.

God makes a way out of no way when, following Jesus, we move from John's simple commands to share, be fair and don't bully into the deeper waters where Jesus lives, as we slowly come to learn to "**conquer** by *yielding*; to **rule** by *serving*; to become **great** by becoming *small*; to gain **wisdom** by becoming *fools* for Christ."
[Feasting on the Word, 64].

Such is the way that John prepared; even if he didn't quite get it.

But truth be told, it's a way we don't get either.

That's why we gather week in and week out; so that with constant remembering, and constant practice, we slowly but surely gain a foothold in the new world our God is making.

It's slippery business.

We need to hang on tight to each other; just as God hangs on tight to our whole motley crew.

And so we wait in hope for the day when Aunty Eunice rings the hand bell so loud it shakes the walls; when James Akaka throws off his paralysis and runs circles around the yard; when our dear Lina again grows her hair down past her waist and sings with joy!

We wait for the day when all the blessed dead are at our side: healed, restored, and alive!

Advent begins in the dark, that is true, but it is pregnant with hope!

This is the promise of the God of Advent.

All that is ill, all that is infirm, all that is hurting, all of it will be taken up and transformed, made new, made free!

And in the meantime, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, our Lord beckons us to begin to live *as if it is already so*.

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