

St. Francis Episcopal Church
Meditation for the First Wednesday in Advent
Matthew 15: 29-39

Advent is my favorite season of the year. Now a psychologist might say that is because I am a firstborn son and that as an oldest child, I just like Advent because it is first.

Maybe there is truth in that. But let me offer two other reasons. First of all, I am a Christian in general (and an Episcopalian in particular) because I believe in the Incarnation. I know that the cross is pretty central to our faith, but Jesus didn't just appear one day on a hill in Galilee to die. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld his glory. The tidy categories that separate a holy God and a sinful humanity are blown apart in Jesus of Nazareth, and while that can never be intellectually grasped by the human mind, it is the great mystery that goes to the very heart of our faith.

I'm not one who generally goes around talking about how we need to put Christ back into Christmas. But that doesn't mean I'm not fully aware of the commercialization of Christmas. It's hard to celebrate the twelve days when our Thanksgiving trees are tinderboxes by December 26, and harder still to celebrate these four weeks. But we can try, and I love this season for that reason: because it forces us to make some counter-cultural choices that are truly about discovering in surprising ways the "reason for the season."

But as you all know I am also a lover of the Old Testament scriptures and I think the other reason I love Advent is that it seems to me the dominant metaphor for Advent is the Babylonian exile. Lent is a fine season, but all in all it's a little bit too penitential for my tastes. I know we are all sinners and I know I am a sinner for sure—and whenever I am in danger of forgetting, there are plenty of people in my life and in this parish to remind me of that. But sometimes it's hard to discern the difference between true penitence and low self-esteem in the Episcopal Church during Lent. The metaphor in Lent takes us back to Israel's forty years in the wilderness: once we were no people, but now we try to figure out what it means to be God's people, given a Law, and promised a land of our own. We are reminded about the gift of daily bread and water from the flinty rock. Come to think of it, I hope no one remembers this sermon on Ash Wednesday when I try to tell you that Lent is my favorite season!

But in truth, Lent really is second favorite for me, even if I suppose that in the same way parents are supposed to love all their kids the same way, clergy are supposed to love all the seasons equally. I love Advent because it begins and ends by the waters of Babylon with a haunting song:

*O Come O Come Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here
until the son of God appear.*

The wilderness is hard and let's face it: I probably wouldn't have made it on manna three times a day. But harder still is to have loved and lost. Harder still is to have tasted milk and honey and then blown it. Harder still is the agony of defeat, the temple destroyed, knowing you can never go home again.

You face real despair in the captivity of the exile, and there must be days when you start to wonder: will there ever be a highway in the desert to lead us home? Or is that just a pipe dream?

By the waters of Babylon, hope is born. Not just a long time ago, but every Advent. We dream these bold dreams in Advent: peace on earth. Good will to all people. Swords into plowshares. Lions lying down with the lambs. The shroud of death being swallowed up forever. John the Baptist preparing the way for the dawn of a new day. Mary saying, “yes Lord, whatever you say.” We dare to ponder all of these things in December—right in the midst of a season when the world says the best we can hope for is that this year’s Black Friday sales exceed last year’s.

The faith of Advent is a pretty big risk—by the waters of Babylon and in the streets of Holden it’s hard to dream large dreams and sing “O come, O Come Emmanuel.” So much easier to try to just keep muddling along, as best we can in our several Babylonian captivities.

So, anyway, a few days into Advent we get this text tonight about loaves and fishes. I guess that the conservative interpretation goes something like this: God is God, the One who created the heavens and the earth, and Jesus is the Son of God. So if God can make a galaxy out of nothing, feeding a few thousand people with seven loaves and a few small fish is really not a big deal, and you don’t need to be a Biblical literalist to say, “let the story be!” Fair enough.

The liberal interpretation I learned in seminary makes a big deal of the way Mark tells the story; he has this little detail about how the disciples didn’t just make the people sit down, but they sat in small groups of fifty or a hundred. That is to suggest that when you look at five thousand people it never seems there is enough, but if you create small groups and invite people to share what they have they may well share their lunch as well. Now in fairness, getting people to share is also a pretty amazing miracle, so we shouldn’t be too quick to dismiss that reading of the story as too rationalistic.

The mystics—and I guess here is where I’d put myself at least when it comes to this text—like the little detail the fourth gospel writer gives us: the bread that is offered comes from a boy in the crowd. He has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many? Yet he offers them anyway, not unlike the widow with her mite. And then you know the rest of the story. So maybe the Kingdom really does belong to such as these: those young enough to be naïve and those old enough to be foolish again. Maybe the kingdom belongs to those hopeful enough to say: “can you do something with this, Jesus? It’s all that I have but I offer it in love.”

I think that in the end, it isn’t our job to figure out how God is going to use our gifts, or how the Kingdom will come, or when it will come. It is simply our work to offer what we have by taking the risk of faith by letting the Christ be born in us and then growing in us. It isn’t our job to say “will this make a difference?” It is our joy (and our great privilege) to say: this is what I have, this is what I offer; use it for your purposes, God.

That’s what I love about Advent.