

In his homily on October 19th concluding the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, Pope Francis stated: *God is not afraid of new things! That is why he is continually surprising us, opening our hearts and guiding us in unexpected ways. He renews us: he constantly makes us “new”. A Christian who lives the Gospel is “God’s newness” in the Church and in the world. How much God loves this “newness”!*

No better description of the spirituality and discipleship practice of Advent, it seems to me, could be given. While the liturgical season of Advent lasts approximately four weeks in preparation for the celebration of Christ’s first coming into our world in his human birth at Bethlehem, the Christian life is called to be one of continual Advent “watchfulness”; living out of the expectation of the “surprise” in-breaking of Jesus and God’s Kingdom in our personal life, in the lives of people we encounter and, in the events of the world.

On one level, today’s Gospel of Jesus urging us to “watchfulness”--remaining steadfast in the practice of our faith and discipleship in the face of his advent into our lives at death; on another level it is also a summons to “watchfulness” to God’s advent in our lives here and now. Like Pope Francis, Jesus is reminding us that God is a God of “surprises”—a God who through the Holy Spirit continues to create anew and renew the Church and each of us!

Perhaps the greatest temptation we face in our lives of faith is what the ancient desert fathers and mothers and St. Benedict name “acedia”—the so-called demon that lays waste at noon. What do they mean? Noon, as we know is the mid-point of the day. The wakefulness of morning and its new energy have begun to wane. A certain fatigue can set in. Hours still remain until the end of the day. The temptation can be very alluring just to simply to coast until the end of the day; not undertake any new initiatives, apply half-hearted effort to the work remaining. The desert fathers and mothers and St. Benedict, like Jesus, issue a warning and a wake-up call regarding our spiritual lives which are subject and

can succumb to a similar temptation and action. The seven most deadly words in a personal or church faith life and practice are these: “I/We have always done it this way!” Or to put it another way as I read once; if you find your life is in a rut, be careful. A rut, by definition, is a narrow grave. The more you travel it, the further you bury your life.

Advent presents us models of people who lived a discipleship of “watchfulness” and response to the “surprise” of God’s advent, in their lives. Mary, the mother of Jesus, who surprised by the message of the angel readily responded “Let it be done to me according to your word.” St. Joseph, who waking from a dream (a not unusual way God can surprise one), “took Mary as his wife” fulfilling his role in God’s plan of human redemption. Contemporary examples would be Popes St. John XXIII, who listening to the Spirit convoked the Second Vatican Council in the Spirit of a “New Pentecost” in the Church, and our present Holy Father, Pope Francis in his document “The Joy of the Gospel” inviting each of us to renewed openness to personal relationship with Jesus and Spirit-filled witness in the world. The invitation of this Advent day, season and the upcoming Christmas feast is this: Am I/we open to being “surprised” by God? Two ways to foster such openness, to make sure we are on the alert for the moment of God’s advent are: a commitment of time to daily prayer and a fruitful celebration of the Sacrament of Penance during this season in order to rise out of whatever “rut” of sin, of deadening routine, is present in my life.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has stated: *“Advent reminds us, ...of two things: first, that God’s presence in the world has already begun, that he is present though in a hidden manner; second, that his presence has only **begun** and is not yet full and complete, that it is in a state of development, of becoming and progressing toward its full form... and we, the faithful, are the ones through whom he wishes to be present in the world.”*

Oh [Lord] would that you would rend the heavens and come down! Help us like Mary, St. Joseph, St. Pope John XXIII and Pope Francis to attend to your surprising advent into our lives today.