

1st Sunday of Advent (Yr. A); 1 December 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5; Rom. 13:11-14; Mt. 24:37-44

Theme: Drawn by the desire to keep Christ from becoming a “thief,” we climb into Advent by daily lives set on his in-breaking presence.

Bp. William Joensen

I have been looking forward to the day when as a pretty much baby bishop ordained two plus months ago, I might have the opportunity to celebrate Mass with you to show you my appreciation for who you’ve been for me for more than thirty years as a priest and before that as a young man. I want to especially thank you for your lavish generosity designated for the purchase of the crosier I use in this Mass and every significant Mass in which I preside as bishop. I’ve learned a lot and continue to do so about what it means to be a bishop—including the fact that one is NOT supposed to use the crosier in a diocese other than one’s own unless one receives permission from the actual ordinary of the diocese. Otherwise, it might be a case where two bishops are carrying crosiers: one will be taken, and the other left! ☺ No, actually Abp. Jackels of Dubuque was happy to give me permission on this special occasion.

I was fortunate over the years to take several significant trips over the years with my Dad, Al Joensen (familiar to many of you) who died a year ago this past May. They were great adventures, but not without a few extra wrinkles in the course of the trip introduced by Dad. One year we arrived at the Hamburg airport on our way to take a driving excursion around Germany, but we met our first speedbump getting off the plane when Dad seemed to take a detour down another corridor and we were separated even before going through passport control on to baggage claim; I was not sure if he was ahead or behind me. There I stood with the bags, looking through the glass windowed wall at Dad on the other side in a secure area with no way of getting through to my side. I was not happy, but he looked at me giving his little wave, until several of us took note and flagged down a security officer who deactivated an alarmed door and let Dad through.

There’s no glass wall mentioned in our Gospel on this First Sunday of Advent, but there does seem to be an invisible separation in play with ultimate significance. Just like the days of Noah when some were eating and drinking, going about their lives clueless of what God had in store, so, too, the promised day of the Son of Man is met with some sort of subtle distinction that is not evident based on what people are doing, the tasks that fill their daily lives. Jesus doesn’t say, “Some will be tending to their fields and their families, while others are out pillaging and exploiting others and generally ignoring their duties.” No, the dynamic seems to bear out the truth of what St. Augustine sketches when he says, “What is endured is identical, but the persons of those who endure it is different” (Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy: Heart of the World*, Vol. 3, p. 740). It’s almost as though people are living in parallel universes, a glass wall posed between them as they image each other on the outward level, but some seem to be transformed in their level of awareness, the horizon and scope of their lives. They believe that our ordinary lives are permeated with a mystery we didn’t manufacture, a gift exchange between God and ourselves of our very lives.

Others, in contrast, have their sights and their expectations fixed solely at ground level, seeking nothing other than more of the same, and are happy with the leftovers of life so much that they receive no more, no less than what they expect. They are caught in a closed loop of desire and possibility that precludes allowing God to draw forth more than meets the eye—maybe kind of like the movie starring Tom Hanks (no, not “Another Day in the Neighborhood”): “Terminal,” where as the Eastern European tourist Viktor Navorski he’s caught at JFK Airport when a war breaks out in his native country, with Homeland Security denying him the right to either enter or exit the country. There’s no place to go, so one might as well make the most of it. For such folks, when God does act decisively, it seems abrupt, arbitrary, so much does it cut against the grain of their sensibilities. Even when God may open the door to permit passage, they are wary and opt to stay put.

Those who lean into God’s ultimate coming are not caught unaware by the in-breaking of the Son of Man, for they have already oriented themselves to the God who imparts meaning to all they do, who infuses his own activity and cooperation in such way that it serves his sacred purpose: to draw all things to himself. They have made themselves available to God in their hearts, ready to welcome God’s affirmation of what they are doing as decent, noble, and salutary, for all they do is for the Lord. Likewise, they are alert to the possibility that God often proposes a friendly amendment to our daily routine, the tasks WE think they need to accomplish. Jesus often wants to enlist us to draw others up to a new level of experience, a recognition by faith of how we shouldn’t sweat the small stuff, for our trust is in God more than ourselves. If the cookies aren’t quite frosted perfectly, what difference does that make to our taste buds? But neither should we feel entitled to blow off our responsibilities or ignore our commitments to those God has placed in our lives. Isaiah’s vision of a holy mountain hike reminds us that we are all pilgrims set on a real destination by a really personal God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose presence stirs true

worship. We are not aiming for some spiritual la-la land that allows us to be drawn up in a sort of mystical stupor, some roller-coaster ride where our feet dangle suspended from terra firma.

Advent is God's and the Church's gift to us meant to awaken our desire for what really matters: Jesus and his promise not to leave us hanging, bereft of purpose or peace, but to reassure us that neither is his arrival some cyber-event that ultimately leaves us with bills to pay, boxes to either discard and put away until next year. Advent is meant to hone and concentrate our awareness of what Jesus is up to, so that he seems less a thief and more of a fellow traveler. We sense that Jesus is always mindful of where we are, what is unfolding in our lives, so that he pleasantly surprise us with his consolation, his consecration of our daily work, study, and life in common by mingling the Spirit he and his Father ceaselessly gift one another with every day, every moment.

How might we cooperate with Christ in this sacred adventure of Advent? I'll try not to add too much to your to-do list: (1) Make friends in a more ongoing way with one of our central cast of Advent characters in our daily prayer and reflection: maybe it's pondering what come to be known as the joyful mysteries with Mary, or triangulating between our dreams and silence, as Joseph does. Maybe it's finding ourselves in a remarkable spot as do Elizabeth and Zechariah, trying to name what God has done in turning our lives upside down by sending us a rather wild, out-of-the box son or daughter like John the Baptist. Or perhaps it's a personal engagement with Isaiah (or Isaiahs, if Scripture folks are heeded), or one of the angels, or Simeon and Anna or one of the shepherds. Draw closer to this real person in an ongoing way over these next weeks, and let their perception of what God is up to, and how they responded, make you more attuned and less caught off guard in your own life.

(2) At the same time, focus ever more at a particular moment of the day upon where God has "stolen" your agenda and substituted something else instead. Maybe it's tied to the praying of the Angelus at midday or 6 PM, as once happened in the fields or communities. Praise God for having taken possession of some moment, celebrating it as a reminder that we do not belong by rights to ourselves—our very being is his.

(3) And if St. Paul advises us to conduct ourselves properly in the day, not succumbing to spiritual overload with the sense orgy caused by the cultural celebration of the season, how about stepping back at least once from a scheduled office party or other function that fatigues us rather than renewing us for the mystery unfolding in our midst. It's OK to decline what might otherwise be regarded as a polite social obligation by saying, "Regrets; I have another commitment"—especially if that commitment is simply lighting a candle and savoring the quiet presence possible in the watches of the night. Or maybe that's the evening of our parish reconciliation opportunities, when we gladly invite Jesus into our personal darkness and let him "steal" our sins in exchange for the peace he leaves behind—something even Santa can't do.

If we adopt one or more of these practices, then we shouldn't be surprised if there's a new kindling of the love relationship between God and ourselves, a relationship met with expectation and desire that gathers all we are about in our present lives and helps us be on the right side of the glass between the parallel universes that has some folks passing through Advent unawares. I wonder if we might become ever more like the fellow Ted Kooser (the Ames High alum, Pulitzer Prize winner and 13th US Poet Laureate) describes in his poem, "Etude":

I have been watching a Great Blue Heron fish in the cattails,
easing ahead with the stealth of a lover composing a letter,
the hungry words looping and blue as they coil and uncoil,
as they kiss and sting.

Let's say that he holds down an everyday job in an office.
his blue suit blends in.
Long days swim beneath the glass top of his desk, each one alike.
on the lip of each morning, a bubble trembles.

No one has seen him there, writing a letter to a woman he loves.
His pencil is poised in the air like the beak of a bird.
He would spear the whole world if he could,
toss it and swallow it live. (*Kindest Regards: New and Selected Poems*, p. 59).

Is the "he" or "she" one of us? Is it God, who peers readily beneath the glass top for love's sake?

Yes and yes: Drawn by the desire to keep Christ from becoming a "thief," we climb into Advent by daily lives set on his in-breaking presence.