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Shopping for Christ

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

For Christians, one word recaptures the essence of Advent. One word: We are "waiting." But that very word (1) creates a problem. The problem (2) compels me to recall our human experience of waiting. And that experience (3) just might make our Advent considerably more Christian.

I

First, the problem. For a moment, let me play the not so grand inquisitor. Don't raise your hands, but...right now, how many of you are waiting? And if you are, waiting for what? Oh I know, here and across the earth, countless folk are saying "I just can't wait for Christmas to come." For all sorts of good reasons: dear faces too long absent, a reprieve from classroom tyranny, Wrangler jeans fashioned for your figure, wassail on your lips and in your heart, carols invented by angels, another ruthless assault on Tom Turkey. Good reasons indeed. But how many here and round the globe are saying "I just can't wait for *Christ* to come"?

The problem is, why *should* you wait for Christ to come? You don't wait for someone who has already come, someone who is actually here. Christ came one midnight clear, came in the imprisoning bands of a baby. And when he left us, paradoxically he stayed with us. He took from us the sensible charm of his presence: the face his mother eyed, the voice that was music to his disciples, the feet Magdalene grasped at his grave. And still he is here. You heard him in his word proclaimed; you glimpse him in your gathering together; in a short while he will touch your tongue or rest in the hollow of your hand. What could you possibly be waiting for? For the final coming of Christ on a pink cloud, separating us saved sheep from those damned goats? If you are, it would be wise not to hold your breath.

The problem? No Christ to wait for. Little wonder Advent means so little to the average Christian, plays second fiddle to the ads for Christmas buying. Understand me: I am not saying we should not celebrate the first Christmas, remember it lovingly each year, relive it in our liturgy. I am asking whether "waiting for Christ" makes any sense when he surrounds us, when he rests within us, when he lies each day on every Eucharistic table on earth. Waiting made sense for the Hebrews of old yearning for a promised Messiah. Waiting made sense for John the Baptist preparing the people for him "who is coming after me" (Mt 3:11). But to wait for a Christ who is here: Is this not to pretend, to playact,

to engage in make-believe?

II

The problem compels a second point: the human experience of waiting. Take two levels of that experience. We experience waiting on one level when the other is simply not here. A poignant example is a diary in a recent book titled *The War*.¹ The diary focuses on the pain of the narrator, a woman of the French Resistance, as she waits for her husband to return from a Nazi concentration camp, from infamous Dachau. "The story of Marguerite's waiting is a very human one, filled with an anguish at times verging almost on despair..."² As the Allies advance in Germany, the realities of the Nazi camps filter back to Paris. She does not know what to think, what to make of the rumors and speculation. Paris is jubilant, but how can Marguerite rejoice when her husband may be dead in a ditch somewhere in Germany? The City of Light is literally lit up again, but without her husband "It is a sign of death, of a tomorrow without [him]." Peace? "It's like a great darkness falling, it's the beginning of forgetting." It's the experience of waiting for someone you love, but you're not at all sure he or she is coming; the other may even be dead.

There is another experience of waiting, quite different from Marguerite's. It is the experience of Mary, told by an angel that God wants her to bring His Son into the world—and from her very flesh. From the moment Gabriel left her, Mary knew that Jesus was there—inside her. But she had nine months to wait. To wait for what? For her child to transpire, to appear, to show himself. For her to see him, touch him, cradle him, kiss him.

What was it like for Mary to wait for Jesus? As a man, I can merely imagine it; only you mothers experience what it was like. He was indeed there; and still he was not yet there—not the way she wanted him to be, not the way he would be in a stable 97 miles away. In the meantime, there was the paradox of pregnancy: hours of ecstasy offset by days of discomfort, by anxiety and fear, by sleepless nights.³

And one dear night, amid the cattle dung and all the litter of a Palestinian stable, Jesus was actually born of her. He came to light, came *from her to her*; she looked into his eyes, heard him wail, held his shivering flesh, bussed him roundly. Of course he was hers before, but what a difference one night makes! This, this is what Mary has been waiting for; here is where Jesus becomes real to her as never before. Before, she believed with her mind, even felt with her body; now, she experiences Jesus with all her senses: eyes and ears, touch and taste and smell.

III

This summons up my third point: How can the experiences of Marguerite and Mary make your Advent more Christian? The point is, your Advent should reflect the experience not so much of Marguerite as of Mary. Like Mary and unlike Marguerite, you need not wait for someone to simply come where you are. As I've said, the Lord Jesus is here, all around you and deep within you. The question is, how alive is he—for you?

If Christ is thrillingly alive for you, as pulsating a person as the man or woman beside you, you have my permission to doze through the rest of this homily. But if Christ is within you only like an embryo, if you haven't felt him move or been surprised by his kicking, if he hasn't warmed you with his presence or sickened you for your sinning, if above all you do

not embrace him like the best of brothers, then his birth in you is overdue. If he is someone you sup with on Sundays because it's a family ritual, and the rest of the week is Christless (not sinful, just Christless), you have a tough job these next 18 days.

You see, it's not enough to just wait for something to happen. You may remember Samuel Beckett's devastating play *Waiting for Godot*.⁴ Godot is a diminutive for God. Didi and Gogo are pathetic creatures, two halves of a single mentality, two absurd clowns who wait each evening at the same tree, wait for Mr. Godot to come along and give meaning to their meaningless existence, killing time before it kills them. As Didi remarks, "habit is a great deadener."⁵

No, if you want Christ to come alive in you, you get off (to put it delicately) your haunches. What did Mary do when the angel went winging away? She did not (as one priest supposedly suggested) go into chapel and say her beads before the Blessed Sacrament. Luke tells us what she did: "Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country" (Lk 1:39), went to the home of her kinswoman Elizabeth. Why? Because Elizabeth was six months pregnant with John, and Elizabeth was an old woman. Elizabeth needed her.

So too for you. Here our annual Christmas craze can help. Every store window, every colorful commercial, is seducing you into giving. What does not come through clearly is that the best of gifts is the gift that is a symbol, pregnant with a depth of meaning not always explicitly stated. A gift is most perfect when it stands for me, when in the gift I am giving myself; the underlying gift is I.

What am I urging? That, like Mary, you activate your waiting, energize it, dynamize it. If you want the Christ within you to come to living birth, stop waiting listlessly at the same old tree for Mr. Godot. Give yourself, bring your Christ, to your sisters and brothers, especially those who look like Jesus only because they are pinned to a cross. Some of you fly to Dominica or Peru, and you do well. But you can spare yourself that expense. Crucified Christs encircle you, from Luther Place to Lorton, from Salvadoran refugees to the family next door, from the bundle of rags on M Street to the fashion plate in your dorm who may be lonely as hell.

I cannot tell you exactly where to go, to whom you should give of yourself, how to go about it. Let the Lord Jesus tell you that—Jesus and your own two eyes, your experience, your sensitivity. What I can tell you is this. If you mirror Mary, if you carry your Christ to someone who needs your caring, the effect can be an amazing grace. A twin grace. Do you remember how Elizabeth reacted when Mary arrived to help her? "When the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk 1:44). Unborn John sensed the presence of Jesus within Mary, and he jumped in joy. And do you recall how Mary responded to Elizabeth's cry? "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk 1:47). So may it well be for you. An other, a scarred sister or broken brother, will be touched by you—more accurately, by the Christ within you; *and* when he comes to life in the other, Jesus will come to light for you, at long last a real person more alive even than you—the source of your joy.

This kind of Advent is not easy. Like any mother in labor, you will cry and gasp and pray, have to push and sweat and bleed. Like Marguerite, you may verge at times on despair, wondering if he whom you want so much to love will ever come within the circle of your arms. Like Mary, you will need all the faith, all the hope, all the courage God alone can

give if you are to rise up and go "with haste into the hill country," onto the hill where Christ is crucified each day, where a naked cross may await even you.

Rough indeed, but it's worth it if Christ comes alive for you. Otherwise Christmas is a crib, a holy day only a holly day, gifts an expensive round of "oohs" and "ahs." These I do not knock; they can be splendidly expressive of love, of joy in one another. But I shall be sad, terribly sad, if your Christmas is confined to these, defined by them; if your Christmas is not caught up in a Christ who not only was once born for you but at this instant is alive for you; if the Christmas Christ is locked away in you as in some tabernacle but is never let loose so that you jump for joy; if on December 25 Christ does not shine out for you on the faces of the crucified.

Believe me, good friends, I am not playing party pooper. Quite the opposite. You want joy that is deeper than a belly laugh? You want joy that doesn't end with a New Year's hangover, a joy that never ends? You want joy that makes your large and small crucifixions bearable? You want joy that thrills your every sense, oozes out of every pore? Then let the Christ in you come out! Not as an infant; he's grown up; he's risen from the dead, risen from all that is death, risen precisely to be your life, to infuse his life into all the life that is latent in you.

Eighteen days to Christmas. Eighteen days to shop for Christ, for a living Christ. It might be too short if you had to shop for him in Bethlehem or on Calvary, in Salvador or Somalia. The good news for shoppers is that the risen Christ has been seen in D.C. In fact, you can find him anywhere in the District, on any face, if... if you want to and if you have eyes to see. Happy hunting.

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Do Not Open before Christmas?

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Two weeks ago my imagination ran wild. I was thinking of Advent. Suddenly I was seized by a sort of Woody Allen vision of John the Baptizer. Half-clothed in camel's hair not designed by Dior, with a leather girdle from Sunny's Surplus, munching locusts from Little Tavern, John crashes New York's Stock Exchange. Amid a furious battle between the dollar and the yen, he shouts like a madman: "Repent!" (Mt 3:2). Most of the buyers and sellers don't hear him; the trading is deafening. Most don't see him; their eyes are glued to the quote board. The few who notice him ignore him or shrug their shoulders or summon security or tell him to "get lost." He screams: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Lk 3:7). Now they're sure he's a jerk from Jonestown. He pleads: "Prepare the way of the Lord" (Mk 1:3). They respond: "The way of who? Get the hell out of here! Back to the jungle!"

Bizarre, off the wall? I say no. Call it anachronistic—a big word for someone out of sync with his surroundings. Twenty centuries sever John from Wall Street. But not bizarre, as if it had no relation to reality. Through John, the Church is proclaiming something to you and me. Probably not "You brood of vipers!" Not necessarily "Repent!" But, as sure as

you're alive, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

But what does that mean? It meant one thing when Yahweh spoke it through the prophet Isaiah to the Israelites exiled in Babylon. It meant something else when John proclaimed it in the wilderness of Judea. It means something else again when the Church announces it to us here and now. So then, (1) a word on Isaiah and John, (2) a word on the Church in Advent, (3) a word on you and me.

I

"Prepare the way of the Lord" goes back to Second Isaiah, what is called the "Book of Consolation."¹ Yahweh announces to the Israelites enslaved in Babylon that their exile is ended, they have paid double for their sins. Indeed their kingdom has been shattered, their temple destroyed, Jerusalem and the cities of Judah all but abandoned, at best wretched village settlements; but against all the odds Israel has survived. The trouble is, the exiles have lost hope; they despair of ever seeing Jerusalem again. And suddenly, out of the blue, utterly unexpected, a promise of freedom. A heavenly voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa 40:3). And Isaiah trumpets:

Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and His arm rules for Him;
behold, His reward is with Him,
and His recompense before Him.
He will feed His flock like a shepherd,
He will gather the lambs in His arms,
He will carry them in His bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.
(Isa 40:10—11)

Where are the exiles to prepare the way of Yahweh? In the wilderness that leads from Babylon to Jerusalem. As the Redeemer God dried up the waters of the Red Sea, made the depths of the sea a way, a way from Egypt to freedom, so now Yahweh will make a way in the wilderness, lead His people home free to the holy mountain Zion.² So then, disheartened exiles, lift up your hearts, raise your sights, your hopes! Don't repeat the Egypt experience, when God had to drag you kicking and screaming through the desert into the Promised Land. As all through your history, God's road is your road. God will lead you back from Babylon, restore Jerusalem, rebuild your treasured temple. Just get your butts out of the mud!

Centuries later John the Baptizer strides onto center stage echoing the words of Isaiah. Once again the Lord is coming, but this time the Jews are not to look for a hidden God. This time God is coming in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Lk 3:16). This is the one John "looked at," and looking said: "Behold, the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:36).

How at that time were the Jews to prepare for Jesus? John is not the poet we found in Isaiah; he shoots from the hip. To the Jews in general: "Repent!" To some Pharisees and Sadducees: "You brood of vipers! ... Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from

these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Mt 3:7—9). John would make it big as a televangelist—except, no air-conditioned doghouse.³

II

Isaiah and John move me to the Church—the Church right now, here in Advent. The liturgy leaves no room for argument: The Lord is coming, and we are to prepare his way. But it doesn't seem to make sense—nowhere near the sense it made for the Old Testament prophet and the forerunner of the Lord. After all, the Lord has already come. He came in swaddling clothes 20 centuries ago—omnipotence in bonds. He comes each day all over the world under seeming bread and wine—our "Godhead here in hiding."⁴ He comes to your inmost being as long as you love—love God more than God's creation. He comes in your sisters and brothers, his living images; for, as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins sang,

...Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.⁵

The Lord is here—in you, in front of you, all around you. Why all the shenanigans about preparing the way of the Lord?

Yes, the Lord has come—thank God! He comes constantly to you: comes to you through the grace that is God within you, comes to you through the Eucharist that moves from the tabernacle on an altar to the tabernacle of your body, comes to you in the hundreds of humans who meet your eyes each day. The crucial question for each and every Christian is: How aware am I of Christ's presence? Let's suppose a Gallup poll asked Christian America "Do the four weeks before Christmas make a difference in your life, change your practical living?" Surely most would say yes. But just what difference? End-of-year inventory? Pre-Christmas part-time job? Christmas cards? Frantic search for what gifts to whom? Semester exams one on top of another? Plane tickets home or to a sun-kissed beach?

With such changes I cannot argue; life must go on. But what of the one person who gives ultimate meaning to your life? Has America subconsciously changed Christmas into a secular event, substituted "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" for "Silent Night, Holy Night," forgotten that the word "Christmas" is fashioned from two of the most meaningful monosyllables in history—Christ and Mass? What Christians need in Advent is not a second or third coming of Christ; he is here. We need a fresh awareness of his presence, an awareness that works a ceaseless change in our lives. Christians must recapture the rapturous feeling our Lady had as she felt the Word made flesh of her grow within her, the emotions that swept over John the Baptizer when he recognized the Savior he had been selected to run before.

III

Lovely rhetoric, reverend sir! But how do you put flesh and blood on the skeleton? Several suggestions, to trigger your own thoughts. I said that the magic word is "aware." So I begin with a question, an examination of conscience, a year-end inventory: Where does Christ rank in the Top Ten of your thinking? Not abstractly; very concretely. In shared time, in real interest, in reflection, contemplation, discussion. Above or below the Redskins or the Hoyas, Bill Cosby or Tina Turner, Rambo or "The Young and the

Restless"6?

Second, time is indeed your enemy. I am not asking time off from your job, slacking off from study. But why not something as corny as a coffee break for Christ? There's an apocryphal story about a Dominican who is supposed to have asked the pope if he might smoke while making his meditation; His Holiness, of course, said no. Then a Jesuit asked the same pope if he might meditate while smoking. "God bless you, son!" said the pontiff. Does industry or academe today make it impossible to sip coffee for ten minutes *and* ponder on the God-man who ought to be the center of your existence?

Third, there is the second syllable of Christmas: the ChristMass. My dear friend the lawyer Edward Bennett Williams fought cancer for a decade. When not in the hospital, Ed started each Washington workday with 7 o'clock Mass here at Holy Trinity. Can it be difficult? Of course. But if the liturgy is the center of Catholic existence, if the Mass is the single most significant source of strength for human living, if the Eucharist is the heart and soul of Catholic spirituality, dare you limit the Mass to days of sheer obligation? Is there a better way to welcome Christ within you? Each Eucharist is an advent: a fresh coming of Christ to your inmost being.

Fourth, be aware that Christ comes to you in others. If God made woman and man to the image and likeness of their Creator; if it is true, as Hopkins sang, that "Christ plays to the Father" through the features of our brothers and sisters, is "lovely in eyes not his"; if Bruce Ritter of Covenant House can discover day after day that "sometimes God has a kid's face," specifically kids pimped and prostituted, used-up and angel-dusted; if it is true, as Christ proclaimed, that when we feed the hungry we feed him—then Advent is no longer a season, no longer four weeks. For Christ can come to you wherever and whenever your eyes meet another's eyes; for your eyes are meeting Christ's eyes, if only you have eyes to see.

Fifth, let Christ come to you on your crosses. I doubt that any of you beyond the age of two has not encountered some kind of crucifixion. The nails have countless forms, from the acne on an adolescent's cheek, through the schizophrenia that severs the human spirit, to the terminal cancer. I beg you, don't try to carry your cross alone. I'm not saying you cannot; I do say it's not a good idea. A cross makes Christian sense only if you meet Christ on it, only if on your cross you are transformed into Christ. I am reminded that a currently popular musician-singer, Bobby McFerrin, called "the beat box of all time," has a dream we can borrow. He recalls: "There's a wonderful [Hermann] Hesse story about a violinist who wishes to be the best in the world. His wish is granted, and as he's playing, he slowly disappears into the music. That's the hope of every artist. It's certainly mine."⁸ The wondrous thing about "disappearing" into Christ is that you become more and more you, the unique person Christ died to shape.

Good friends: Christmas has for ages been synonymous with giving. I have no problem with that, as long as whatever you give, large or small, is symbolic of yourself—as long as the gift stands for you. But even more important, I submit that the supreme Christmas gift is the one gift that should not surprise you. Christmas will simply celebrate what you have: the gift that was first given to you from a stable in the Middle East, the gift that has been given to the world through 20 centuries, the gift that rests within you: God's own Son, God's love in flesh. This is the one gift you will enjoy most fully if you are aware that you already have it. This is the only gift you should never mark "Not to be opened before Christmas." Christmas is every day—if you prepare the way.

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Advent with Mary

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

There is a danger to Advent. It tends to become impersonal, a season—like winter. We are still waiting for Christ to come, and till he comes we have a vacuum; there is no one else around. All we have is an Advent wreath with four candles.

In point of fact, three captivating persons dominate the Advent liturgy—three persons who prepare in different ways for the coming of the Savior. One is the prophet Isaiah. He hopes passionately for the prince of peace, represents Israel's yearning for the messianic king, but does not know where he is to be found. Israel is waiting for God to come in His own good time, a God who is readying His people even in exile to be redemptive, to bear suffering witness to Yahweh, to be a people of hope.¹ The second Advent figure is John the Baptist. He is the Messiah's messenger, his herald, his forerunner; but he is puzzled. He expects the Messiah to be a fiery social reformer, Elijah come to earth again; and he doesn't quite know what to make of the Jesus he sees. The third dominant figure is a soft-spoken lady in Nazareth. It is of her I would speak to you today. In three stages, with three questions: (1) What is the Advent liturgy all about? (2) How does the mother of Jesus fit into it? (3) What does the Mary of Advent say to us today?

I

First, what is the Advent liturgy all about? What are we doing these four weeks? Very simply, it is a period of expectation; we are waiting. Waiting for what? We focus on two events. We put ourselves back into the situation of an expectant people, a people on tiptoe for the first coming of the Messiah; and we rekindle our expectation of his final coming.

A people on tiptoe. That is why today's reading from Baruch, Jeremiah's companion and secretary, is so appropriate. We put on the shoes of a people in exile, thirsting for a God long in coming but certain to come. They are told to "take courage...for He who named you will comfort you" (Bar 4:30). They are summoned to look out of their darkness to a new dawn:

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height
and look toward the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east,
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
(Bar 5:5)

It matches the matchless lines Luke quotes from Isaiah in today's Gospel:

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways shall be made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.
(Lk 3:5—6; cf. Isa 40:4—5)

This waiting for the Promised One we recapture in Advent, we relive it, we re-present it. But, as Christians, we know that this aspect of the liturgy, Christ's first coming, is a fact of history; he has already come. He came on a midnight clear, in infant powerlessness. What we actually await now is his second coming, "with great power and glory" (Mk 13:26). That is why today's reading from St. Paul is so appropriate: "I am sure that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6), the day when Christ will return and the present age will end. This is the day of which we pray in each day's Mass: "Deliver us, Lord, from every evil and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ." We wait in joyful hope. In this liturgy, in every liturgy, we proclaim Christ's death "till he comes again." Only then, in its full reality, will "all flesh see the salvation of God."

Advent, then, announces two advents. One advent is history, and the liturgy helps us relive it "on tiptoe of expectation" (Lk 3:15 NEB). The other advent is "future shock," and the liturgy fixes our eyes on it; for when he comes, we "shall see [Christ] as he is" (1 Jn 3:2).

II

But how does Mary fit into the Advent liturgy? Not only on next Wednesday's feast day. Not primarily because we celebrate her birthday on September 8, subtract nine months, and celebrate her conception on December 8. The reason goes much deeper. Mary is an Advent figure because the mother of Jesus is history's most remarkable model of a world's waiting. More strikingly than anyone else, she reveals in living color how the Christian should wait for Christ.

First, the way Mary waited for Christ's *first* coming. Not only like every other Jew waiting for the Promised One. Not only peering into a clouded future, hoping against hope, wondering, anxiously questing: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Mt 11:3). No, Mary waited uniquely, as no other in history: He for whom she was waiting was nestling within her. Not simply in her thoughts, her dreams, her hopes, her yearning. In her flesh. His flesh was her flesh; her flesh was his. She was waiting only to see his face and to offer him to the world. Little wonder she burst into rapturous song: "My soul declares the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit finds delight in God my Savior...for He who is mighty has done great things for me..." (Lk 1:46—49).

"On tiptoe of expectation" indeed, a singular sort of waiting, those nine intimate months: her Savior within her, her Savior growing from her, her Savior coming to manger straw through her.

Second, the way Mary waited for Christ's *second* coming. In a word, she was his disciple. Not only the first of Jesus' disciples, but the very model of what discipleship demands. Not that she was one of the Twelve; rather that she lived what the New Testament "disciple" means. To be a disciple means to follow—to follow only one Master. How? A constant theme in the Gospels: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk 3:35). "My mother and my brothers, they are the ones who listen to the word of God and act on it" (Lk 8:21).

That, at its best, is Mary: she who hears God's word and does it. Such was Mary at the Gospel's beginning. At a decisive moment in salvation's story, God asked this teen-age Jewish girl to mother His Son. Her response, simple and total: "Let it happen to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). As you say, so be it done. No wonder that in Luke Mary is the first to be praised in a phrase that will characterize the faithful down the ages: She is the woman "who has believed" (Lk 1:45). And this girl who believed, who said yes to God's word, acted on it. She did not lie down and act pregnant. "In those days," Luke tells us, "Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country" (Lk 1:39). Why? To be with a relative, Elizabeth; for Elizabeth was with child, and Elizabeth was old. Mary was carrying Christ not for herself but for a world in need. Quite fitting, therefore, that when Mary greeted her kinswoman, John the Baptist "leaped for joy" in Elizabeth's womb (Lk 1:44).

Such was Mary throughout her life. It is a slender but thrilling theme in Luke. Six times he takes the notion "hearing and doing God's word" and touches it somehow to the mother of Jesus.² Perhaps most impressively, she is "blessed" not primarily because she bore God's Son; rather because she is a prime example of "those who listen to the word of God and keep it," observe it, follow it (Lk 11:28). She is family to Jesus not so much because she is his physical mother; rather because she is of "those who listen to the word of God and act on it" (Lk 8:21).³

Luke knows, too, that to be Jesus' disciple is to follow a Lord who is on the way to Jerusalem and a cross; and so he recalls Simeon's prophecy to Mary in the temple: "a sword shall pierce you too" (Lk 2:35). It did. On Calvary—in line with Luke—the Evangelist John, who speaks harshly of Jesus' relatives "who never believed in him" (Jn 7:5), does not stress physical relationship. Mary's role is to be mother of the beloved disciple, and with her as mother the beloved disciple becomes Jesus' true brother. These two who believe in him, these two he "leaves...behind as the family of disciples who constitute truly a mother and a brother."⁴

And how did Mary act between the ascension of Jesus and the descent of the Spirit? Listen to Luke: The Eleven "with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). The first to hear the gospel even before Jesus' birth, praised during his ministry because she heard the word of God and acted on it, Mary remains faithful after her Son's death—listening to the Lord, waiting for the Spirit.

III

A remarkable woman, no doubt; but what does Mary say to us today, these Advent weeks? Simply, she shows us how to wait for Christ. Not only for his second coming, "with great power and glory"; for his constant coming each day, in poverty and powerlessness that make his crib look like a castle.

This is not pious poetry; this is the word of God. Jesus comes to us in the hungry and thirsty, in the stranger and the naked, in the sick and the shackled (cf. Mt 25:35—40). Mary saw that even before her Son proclaimed it. Her Magnificat, her song of joy after Gabriel's glad tidings, is not an abstract theological thesis: "Bend the knee, my friends; for within me lies the God-man, consubstantial with the Father, consubstantial with us." Mary rejoices because God "has had regard for (has looked with loving care upon) the low

estate (the humble station) of His slave woman" (Lk 1:48). The good news about Jesus, she sings, is that God "has scattered the proud...has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly...has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty...has come to the aid of His servant Israel, mindful of His mercy" (Lk 1:51—54).

The problem is, God fills the hungry not with miraculous manna from heaven but through us. The hungers of the human family cry out to us: hunger for bread, for justice and peace, for understanding and love—hunger for God. Their cry is not only a human cry; it is God's word to us. We are Jesus' disciples, in the image of Mary, only if we listen to that word and act on it, as God gives us to act. I cannot prescribe for any of you; only God does that. I don't know what you are supposed to do about the living skeletons in Mother Teresa's Calcutta and the downtrodden in D.C., about the bombed-out in Lebanon and the MX in Wyoming, about the slums in El Salvador and the pimps and prostitutes in Times Square, about the schizoid psyches in St. Elizabeth's and the lonely old on your street. This alone I do say: God is not telling you to do nothing. You must give ear to a God who is speaking to you now, and act on what He says. For here is today's manger, the way Christ comes to you in helplessness. No longer a baby, but just as impotent.

This fresh kind of Advent—active awaiting, ears tuned to the Spirit, eyes awake to Christ in a thousand Gethsemanes—this will cost you: "a sword shall pierce you too." Discipleship, like grace, does not come cheap. But for your comfort and strength, be aware that you wait, like Mary, with your Lord already within you. Don't envy our Lady to excess; for, as Jesus told you, if you love him and keep his word, his Father loves you and they come to you and make their home with you (cf. Jn 14:23). Christ deep in you and Christ all around you—your whole life can be a ceaseless Advent, a splendid prelude to his final coming. All you have to do is murmur with Mary "Whatever you say, Lord," and then do whatever he says. That's all...That's all?

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Second Sunday of Advent, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:4-6,8-11; Luke 3:1-6

In the Scripture, Jerusalem is a powerful image of a gathering of people that God longed to save, to heal and to free. We spoke last week of Jesus' entrance into that great city at the end of his public life and how he wept over the simple realization that the people had missed the message. They had not heard it; they had not taken it in. When we speak of this promise made to Jerusalem, we speak of the promise God is seeking to accomplish within every human being. The promise is transformation. The promise is a kind of wholeness that is our inheritance. The season of Advent is a calling of each of us, a seeking, drawing us into a place of awareness where this message of healing and transformation can come to us and make a difference. It can change our lives. One of the things we experience as a member of the Church during this season is that we simply long to be awakened. We long to arise to a level of consciousness where we see more and understand more. What is it that God is longing to do for us? What does he want to

accomplish within us? There is a powerful image of what God wants to do within us in the reading from Baruch. It's repeated in the gospel from Luke. I want to concentrate on this image for the time we have together.

The image is that God is able to do a great work within us. Somehow, it is like the valleys that are deep and dark being made level. Mountains that are high and difficult to ascend are made level. The burning heat of the day is shaded by fragrant trees. A winding road is made straight. We are being led to a place. And all the things, all the obstacles that are in the way, are somehow changed and transformed. What is so powerful about Scripture, the message of God, is the way it uses symbolic language and invites us to enter into the living symbol and let the symbol speak to a level within us that is often untouched by ordinary life. What are these words trying to say to us, to our soul, about what is going on today in our lives, what is going on this week in our lives. One of the things this message and this image is working on is that there is - at least in my life - a feeling that when I'm moving in a certain direction I often get lost. I don't know which way I'm going. I have lost a sense of direction. I believe and I trust in the process, but sometimes the process doesn't have any clear sign it is moving in any particular way. The feeling is hopeless and dark. Maybe it even feels as if it is too difficult. What this image is trying to say to you and to me is that God is constantly trying to give us a sense of direction, that even though things may not be happening the way we think they should, we are moving in the right direction. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. We've often heard that God writes crooked lines in these straight paths. Very likely, the things that seem to be not the way we would like them to be, the things that take us in the direction we don't think we should go, are often the shortest way to the next point. We all experience the high mountains and the deep valleys in our daily lives. I think about that kind of manic thing that happens to me (and I believe it happens to many of us) where one day everything is perfect and the next day everything is absolutely dark. There is a natural cycle to the way in which life unfolds. One of the things I think we need to be especially in touch with is that cycle of ups and downs, light and darkness, confusion and understanding, doubt and faith. But the key is to somehow get some part of us on level ground, some part of us while we are going up or down, holding us all together. It might be that deep, inner soul part of us that is steady, rock-like, moving on level ground while our emotions and the life around us can be going in all kinds of ups and downs. Somehow there is steadiness in us, a kind of inner place of calm and peace. God longs to place that sense of peace there. He longs to awaken that calm within us. In the reading from Baruch, there are powerful images of how we are gathered together around a Word, how children are brought back to their parents. How there is a community being formed called Jerusalem. It's interesting to me that the image is the people are gathered from east and west at the "word of the holy one." It's like the word is the message. Not just a spoken word, but a mysterious image that moves like a word into us and bypasses ears. It goes into another place, like into the center of our chests. I think a lot of us have had that experience when we listen to someone speak and, all of a sudden, we feel their words in our bodies. We feel their words in the center of our being. It's like they penetrate there. They go to some other kind of listening mechanism deep within us. That's the message of God; that's the message of the truth. No matter what form that truth takes, it is always of God. God is the author of that truth because he is the one who made us.

The unfortunate thing about daily life in our culture (and it's been this way in every culture since the beginning) is that there are so many voices, so many sounds, so many noises that distract us from this real work of listening. When we listen with this kind of soulful part of us, what we are doing is really awakening the part of us Jesus is speaking

of when he says, "This is the time to wake up. This is the time to listen." It's the truth that we want. Anyone open to the truth, anyone eager to hear the truth, is really fully entering into this Advent season. The time is all about sharpening our skills so that we can do this work a little bit better. One of the images of the season is that of slowing down. What an ironic thing in our culture when this holiday season is a time in which we all tend to look at it and say, "Oh my God, I don't have time to do all of this extra stuff." Our lives speed up. The Spirit of the season is just the opposite, to slow it all down, to somehow open ourselves to something - to the soul work, to the real understanding of what's going on so that we can truly experience what is going on. St. Paul, in the letter to the Philippians, is filled with praise for this community. He says, "You know, you are doing a great job, and I am convinced that the work you are doing is going to be supported by God. He is going to make sure that the work begun in you, this good work, is going to be carried through to completion." That's a wonderful image for this kind of work. It keeps the peaks and valleys from getting in the way. It is working. It will work. If we want to hear the truth, we will hear it. It will penetrate through all the other voices, all the other noises, it's going to reach some deep part of us and say what we need to hear so that life can become more authentic. Paul describes "authentic life" as learning to value the things that really matter and to live with a consciousness of those things.

One of the dangers of living a more authentic life is that we become aware of those times when we are not living an authentic life. That is a humiliating experience many times. We can hear our voices not really expressing the feelings deep within us. We find ourselves saying things that we don't really believe. Not that we have to proclaim the truth at every single moment to every single person, but there are moments when we long to tell the truth and still what comes out of us is not the truth. As we begin to move more and more into the experience of living in the truth, we recognize more and more the times we are not really doing that. Then comes another disturbing side-effect of this work of really listening to the truth and living it. We begin to hear in other people's voices, sometimes people close to us, that same lack of authenticity. It's disturbing, and in some cases, even frightening. The challenge is to simply continue in this process to not let that fear become an obstacle, to continue to work with the whole process. Another way we might imagine the whole process of Advent and the invitation from the Spirit to move continually in the direction of living more in the truth is that we have to learn how to accept the things we cannot change. I am amazed at how much energy is expended in resisting things the way they are. Somehow we are willing, consciously, to choose this way of resistance, this way of living in illusions and denial. We do it willfully because we are afraid that if we enter too much in the place of the truth it will be too difficult for us. There is something we really are afraid of.

Notice that some of the prominent images of the season of Advent are light, understanding, wisdom. The only thing I know of that really dispels fear is love. One of the things that God continually says to us is: "I want you to experience my love for you." If that love is real, if God is really serious about what he is saying and if he is really in charge, if he has determined so much around us and if life has at its center this divine being - then doesn't it seem strange that we would choose to create a world of our own and feel that it is safer than the world that a God who loves us more than we could ever love ourselves has created? Doesn't it seem strange that the fear of that which is true should be greater than living in that which is false? This challenge to experience life, a challenge Paul gives us, is simply asking us to touch into this place of the truth and feel what it is like. I really believe the challenge is that when we feel the authentic life, when we feel the truth as it really is, there is something like dew and honey that is poured over

the soul. It feels so right. When compared to the experience that we are often in - when we are living in an illusion or faking it, when we are hiding our real feelings and living in that whole world we sometimes create - we recognize that there isn't in that world anything like this feeling we have when we are living in the truth.

We have a powerful image of Jerusalem being called to rise up and to awaken to the beauty and the truth that God has longed to pour into it. When we get a sense of the sadness Jesus experienced when he looked at this great city and said, "Why, oh why, did you miss this message; why did you close yourself off from it," we can then sense and feel that loss through the person of Jesus. We are then able to feel that same sadness in our own lives. We may even look in the mirror and say, "How sad it is that you have missed so many things in your life, so many opportunities to live more authentically and in the truth," and to take that sadness and to use it as a motivation, as something that moves us into a courageous place. A place of real attentiveness to what is happening, to what is happening when we are not living authentically and to feel what that is like. And attentiveness to when we are really living authentically and to what that feels like. Embracing that experience over and over again, in the words of Paul, helps us to develop a "great understanding." The understanding is in the area of discernment, of learning to value the things that really matter. That is the way the Church would like us to imagine the coming of Christ, the event of the Incarnation: Divinity poured into our humanity, the two mingling together and somehow bringing about something enormously powerful. Jesus spoke with authority "like no one else," according to Scripture. I think that authority was nothing other than a human being living as fully as possible an authentic life.

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