

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Micah 5:2-5; Luke 1:39-55

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There was a time, though perhaps only in the legendary past, when Advent was a somber season, except on Sundays, which is always the day of resurrection no matter what time of year it is. The same was true for Lent, a season when people “gave things up”—made small sacrifices in their lives, like refraining from eating chocolate or sweets—in order to help them remember the season. The one day each week when people could indulge themselves was Sunday because, as I said, this is the day of resurrection no matter the time of year. No matter the season, you celebrate on Sunday.

In recent times, though, this has flip-flopped. Our wider context, of course, is no longer presumably Christian; for better or for worse, our culture no longer holds to the church’s calendar and esthetic as a matter of course. Christendom is a thing of the past; for better or for worse, we live in a post-Christian era. One piece of evidence of this is that Advent has come to be kept only in church, if even here. Congregations are often ambivalent at best about spending Advent in sackcloth and ash. Many congregants push to sing Christmas carols during the Sunday services through the month of December. That has many pastors finding themselves in hot water with their congregations as they insist: no Christmas carols until Christmas. Regardless of music, though, the lectionary doesn’t let up. It has us, even amidst this month of merry-making, hearing on Sundays of John the Baptizer and repentance for the forgiveness of sin, and even, on the first Sunday of the season, the end of days. In sum, December is the Christmas season, except on Sundays when we yet wait in the darkness and watch for the dawn.

I think this is a blessing the church can offer our wider culture. Amidst all the madness of the Christmas season in its secular forms, this is a crucial way the wider church can serve the people—inviting us all to sit in the gloaming that has a truth to tell and therein to find comfort. Merry-making, after all, can be exhausting, especially when your heart isn’t in it. The expectations that Christmas has come to be about—the perfect gift for everyone you’ve ever met, the perfect meal for all who are spending the big day with you, the perfectly decorated home for all on your street to see, the perfectly planned and executed party for all the people you owe a good time—can leave you feeling defeated before you’ve even begun. So often the word of God comes as a contrast to the din of the larger culture. In this faith, many churches offer a “Blue Christmas” service, for the people who need their experience of the darkness in this life confirmed and blessed. I think this is a fine idea. But I do wonder if a better idea might simply be reclaiming Advent as a season worthy of remembering, and on its own terms.

Our culture’s compulsion to pursue happiness borders on the pathological. Barbara Ehrenreich has written a book entitled *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. It comes of her experience with breast cancer, a year she spent in fear and pain, and berated by so many people for this be-

ing her primary experience of the disease. Surrounded by pink ribbons and teddy bears and greeting cards with cheesy poetry and kitschy illustrations, she suffered for everything being so upbeat. Lance Armstrong calling cancer “the best thing that ever happened to me,” a peer closer to Ehrenreich calling cancer her “connection to the divine,” a contributor to a cancer-support website chiding her for her “bad attitude” with the warning that “it’s not going to help you in the least,” all left her feeling that much more isolated and filled with dread. Addressing now the more general tendency in our culture, according to book reviewer Hanna Rosin, Ehrenreich writes,

What started as a nineteenth century response to dour Calvinism has, over the years, turned equally oppressive....Stacks of best sellers equate corporate success with a positive attitude. Flimsy medical research claims that cheerfulness can improve the immune system. In a growing number of American churches, confessions of poverty or distress amount to heresy. America’s can-do optimism has hardened into a suffocating culture of positivity that bears little relation to genuine hope or happiness.

She focuses in one chapter on this trend in business culture which notes that since Dale Carnegie’s book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was published in 1936,

motivational speaking has become so ubiquitous that we’ve forgotten a world without it. In seminars, employees are led in mass chants that would make Chairman Mao proud: “I feel healthy. I feel happy. I feel terrific!” Corporate managers have transformed from coolheaded professionals into mystical gurus and quasi celebrities “enamored of intuition, snap judgments, and hunches.” Corporate America has begun to look like one giant ashram, with “vision quests,” “tribal storytelling,” and “deep listening,” all now common staples of corporate retreats.

Though I’m far removed from this culture, I’ll confess to enjoying one cynical remedy for it all—the demotivational posters prompted as a response to those motivational ones. You’ve seen them—the beautiful color photograph of a sunset or a mountain or a bird in flight with a big-fonted word printed below meant to inspire and a snappy aphorism printed underneath it all in finer print. The demotivators are deliciously cynical. A hiker at the foot of a mountain all silhouetted by sunrise, and written underneath, “Challenges,” and in the fine print: “I expected times like this—but never thought they’d be so bad, so long, and so frequent.” An eagle in flight over snow-capped peaks evokes, “Leaders,” and in the fine print, “Leaders are like eagles. We don’t have either of them here.” A wind-bent tree on a shoreline calls to mind the word “Adversity,” and in the fine print, “That which does not kill me postpones the inevitable.” A snowball and the path that led to its making are explained, “Team-work,” and in the fine print, “A few harmless flakes working together can unleash an avalanche of destruction.”

This trend that Ehrenreich names and explores has found a perfect handmaid in the Christmas holiday now stripped of its religious significance and considered merely a happy celebration of happiness. But there’s something saddening about it—as the

attempts at happiness so often don't make us happy, as the din of merrymaking seems only to distract or even deny the fact of darkness both outside and in. Don't get me wrong; I love Christmas with all its trappings, and I don't object to its secularization on religious grounds. I *regret* its secularization on the grounds of human need. Christmas is an answer to a human need. Christmas is God's answer to our deepest need—our need for God in our lives, our need for God as the thing that endures and abides, our need for God as what's true and life-giving, our need for love and forgiveness, mercy, and peace.

But Christmas as we've come to celebrate it in our culture is a mere reaction to human fear—and a pathetic reaction at that (pathetic meaning arousing of compassion). This is why the so-called and self-proclaimed defenders of Christmas strike me as mystifyingly off the mark. In their defense of a public school's right to distribute candy canes to the children or an airport's right to play Christmas tunes over the sound system or a town's right to turn off the Christmas lights along Main Street after most of the shoppers have gone for the night (all of which are factual occurrences in recent years), they're defending the least meaningful aspects of the holiday and perhaps even the most deceptive, the very things those of us who *are* sitting in the dark waiting for the Christ might want to be done with all together. Really, all the fuss strikes me as an increasingly furious attempt to recover something that's been lost in the season's secularization and in our culture-wide confusion about all things religious. And what's been lost isn't the right to candy or fake snow or images of flying reindeer or even a plastic likeness of a baby in a plastic likeness of a manger on town land, but a language—a language that names what's real for all people, a language that speaks not of happiness, but of hope.

When Elizabeth, surprised by her cousin Mary's visit and filled herself with the Holy Spirit, said to Mary, "Blessed are you among women," Mary responded in a remarkable way. The song she sang, often called "The Magnificat," is a recalling of Hannah's song as she rejoiced in her son Samuel who would be a great prophet for Judah and Israel and who would anoint David king. Lovely on its own terms, this song so at the ready on Mary's lips also signals that the culture Mary was steeped in was a rich one. It was flawed, to be sure, as we've remembered these last two weeks in our hearing John the baptizer rip into it with fanged words, and as she herself pointed out in these words of hope—hope that takes an honest accounting of all that's out of balance and envisions a time of justice and equanimity. "The Lord has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful and lifted the lowly; the Lord has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away." Yes, of course her culture was flawed, like every culture. But it had its richness as well, such that when something beyond the beyond began to happen for Mary, she had a way to express it. She had a means to name and come to terms with what was happening—a means of communication that is also a means of communion. Really, it might be said that she conceived with the Holy Spirit the moment she began to speak—to sing!—the language she'd inherited from her tradition that had power enough to rise to such an occasion.

What language have we at the ready today to come to terms with great and terrible things that happen in this life? Having none is a sort of poverty that all the wealth in the commercial world can do nothing to compensate for. If we have none, we might well be said to be rich and sent empty away. And this too is a blessing the church

can offer our wider culture, for it's the church's privilege to have this wealth to give away.

An image of birds in flight, circling the sun evoke "Hope," but in the fine print comes the qualifier, "may not be warranted at this point," and a closer look at that motivational photograph reveals that these circling birds are vultures. This, of course, is the cynical answer to the bright-sided culture whose glare blinds us to the light that overcomes darkness for good. I find it amusing, of course, just as I find our cultural Christmas happy-making. But none of it satisfies for more than a little while. None of it magnifies my soul.

Besides, hope is indeed warranted at this point. Hope, if not happiness, is indeed warranted and moreover welcomed, as the seed of the Spirit by which Christ is in us conceived. Hope that plumbs the dark depths of our lives is the womb of new life that death cannot overcome. Its challenge is that we dive so deep. Its promise is that we won't come up empty.