

3rd Sunday of Advent cycle A

One of my fondest memories of the East Coast was seeing the Hudson Valley in the fall: all sorts of hues of reds and oranges on the trees, and the trees filling up a mountainside with these magnificent bursts of color. I missed it, and so decided that this year I would take an autumn vacation in New England and take in the fall colors one more time. So I researched and tried to determine the most opportune time to go. And I went to Vermont, and the mountains were very nice, but the colors...not so much. Wouldn't you know, the year I go there, would be the year fall would be late in Vermont. Mostly green, with a few dots of red and orange and yellow. Not what I expected. Not what I spent money on to go see. Life is filled with expectations, and so life is full of disappointments. We expect many things: for the leaves to be beautiful in Vermont in the fall, for southern California to be sunny and warm, for the Huskers to win, for our children to outlive us, to be safe wherever we go in this country; and we are disappointed, in big ways and small, but very often; because the more we expect from this world, the more disappointments we set ourselves up for. As the old saying goes, the only things we can count on with certainty are time, tide, death, and taxes.

In today's Gospel passage from Matthew, John the Baptist sends a messenger to Jesus asking him if he is the one who is to come, or do they look for another? Since John was the one sent to pave the way for the Lord, we might think that he had some sort of intuitive knowledge about Jesus. But John, like all the others of his day who were awaiting the Messiah, had his expectations. Most likely, he was expecting a fiery prophet, one who comes, bringing judgment upon an unruly and often unrepentant people. He was expecting someone of power, and perhaps of great influence; one whom the people would see and think, no doubt, this is he, the one who is to shepherd God's people Israel. And so with these expectations not exactly being met, John is left to wonder: is Jesus, his cousin, the one? Even though the other prophecies line up, his demeanor was not what they thought it would be; John believes, but is not quite certain. And so he asks: are you the one? And Jesus sends John's messengers back to him, telling them to relay to John what they see and hear: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the poor receive the good news! Jesus is the one who came to restore a broken world. Similarly, in James' letter to the Church, the people have come to develop expectations of Jesus and of their world: they figured that they'd see equity, and justice, and an end to poverty and oppression. James uses the example of the early and late rains, both of which the growers needed for their crops, and admonished the people to be patient. The coming of the Lord is at hand, James wrote; the judge is standing at the gates. But the here and now is not about us getting what we want: it is about us getting prepared so that when the judge comes, he will find a people prepared to meet him.

As did the people of Jesus' day, as did the people to whom Saint James wrote, we are a people of great and many expectations—and of things far more consequential than catching the fall foliage at its peak. We seem to have certain expectations of God: that he will hear our prayers, give us what we want, make everything better; after all, isn't that what being a person of faith is all about? But then, things do not go according to our prayers, we don't receive what we want so badly, and things do not get better; and when these things happen, many people start to question their faith. So where is God in all this? Where is he on 9/11, during Katrina, at the Westroads? Faith in its purest form doesn't need an answer to that question; instead, it goes back to the evidence, just as Jesus told John's followers to go back to John with the evidence. The proof of God does not lie in tragedies prevented and sadness avoided; it lies in the cross. It lies in a historical fact and a historical moment. The evidence is the witness of those who believe in him, the miracles which have occurred in his name, and the transformation of self, not the world around me, but me. And that was basically what James was saying to the early church: believe not because the world is all different now, but because you are all different now. That prayer that went up? It didn't change the world; but maybe it changed me. That thing I wanted but didn't get? Perhaps I didn't need it, perhaps, even though good in an of itself, it was not to my eternal good. Those things that did not get better? Maybe they will remind me that Christ came, not to put a band aid on the wound of sin, but to touch it, and heal it; and that healing does not arrive until he does, at the end of time.

As we draw closer to December 25th, it's easy to get drawn into what we might call the frenzy of Christmas. Talk about having expectations: we dream of the warm homecomings, the grand feasts, and almost magical gift exchanges. We want everything from the decorations to the food to the atmosphere to the weather to be just perfect: how about a nice blanket of snow for a white Christmas, but no snow on the 24th, anywhere, so that we can all get to where we want to go? And how often does the holiday disappoint? Someone has too much to drink and starts the annual family feud; we run out of time and the cookies are store-bought instead of homemade, or we show up to the family gathering with gifts in bags, because we didn't have time to wrap them, or we show up so worn out from lack of sleep that it's just no fun to get together? The common threads in all of those? None of them meet expectations, none of them are perfect, and none of them are really Christmas. One of the best descriptions I ever heard of our Lord's nativity was from a letter to the editor in the paper that dismissed Christmas as simply being a "trumped up, overblown, Roman Catholic Holiday." Well, I'm not sure I'd use the expression "trumped up," but the truth is that the Church started celebrating the feast of our Lord's nativity not from the very beginning, but very early on; and not like it was a birthday party, but as a mystery of

faith—that Jesus came and dwelt among us, true God and true man. And the date was fixed not in the annals of births and deaths in Bethlehem, but in the Church liturgical calendar. And I don't think I would use the word “overblown,” but no doubt that the Church sees this mystery as being the most important mystery of our Lord's life that we celebrate, right after the Resurrection. And as far as it being a Roman Catholic Holiday, well, look at the word itself: Christ Mass, the Mass celebrating Christ as who he is, truly man and truly God—his feast day. Don't get me wrong, the trappings are nice, and I love 'em as much as the next guy; but if you come and worship on Christmas Day, and truly enter into the mystery, and sing all the songs and make all the responses and really participate and genuinely **get** why it is the Church has made such a big deal out of this mystery, then you've had a good Christmas—no matter what happens, or doesn't happen with dinner, or family, or gifts.

As they were going off, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John, what did you go out to the desert to see? Don't say a reed swaying in the wind, because you could see that anytime, not just when John was there. Don't say royalty, because you knew that John was dressed the exact opposite of royalty? They had their expectations of John, that he would be a fiery prophet; and **he** did not disappoint. If they expected a prophet, then, listen and follow the words of the prophet, and prepare to follow the man who he said is the one to follow. On this midway point in Advent, it may be good to think of what our expectations are of this great feast; and I'll throw in, right now, that I think it is meant to be a bittersweet holiday. Joyous, because of the beauty and love and celebrations; sad, because of missing loved ones, dashed dreams, and our own imperfections. The bittersweet is the beauty of it: if this was all perfect, if life were ever all perfect, why would Jesus have had to come and be our Savior? If you want it to be perfect, then do what you can with the baking and sending cards and buying gifts, but expect this: profound joy over the coming of the Savior, and a little glaze of sadness that the world got broken to begin with, and the brokenness touches our lives still. Approach it with the patience which Saint James admonished us to have, and remember that it is not about us making the day perfect; it is about observing a day which was necessary in bringing about our eventual perfection.

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