

Old Friends: The Advent Texts

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Old friends came by for a visit a few weeks ago, seminary friends with whom my wife Maria and I have, over the years, shared some of the most important moments of our lives. We hadn't seen each other in some time, but we picked up right away, recalling old times together, all talking at once, laughing, somehow deeply relieved to be together again. In an instant, it was as if they had never left.

You have friends like that, I'd guess, perhaps nearby, though given the transient nature of ministry, more likely far away. Friends whose stories you know, whose histories are precious to you, whose current lives matter to you as much from a distance as if they still lived next door. Way back at the start of our friendship, we were just down the seminary hallway from one another. After that, a bit of travel was required in order to get together. Then, flights became necessary, and our visits grew less frequent.

It doesn't take long though, when getting together with friends like these; you find that you reestablish that old rhythm, enter again a level of trust and mutual understanding based on years of memories that brings back the intimacy that seasons and miles apart cannot erase. Soon family stories, work tales, personal revelations that we share with almost no one were pouring forth from each of us without reserve, with the comfortable familiarity of friends who've spent many hours in each other's homes, in the home before this one, and the home before that. We shared fond memories of parents now gone, whose tables we'd once sat around long into the evening, daring to speak aloud our dreams for work and for life. We remembered holding each other's fussy babies, now fully formed adults making their own ways in the world. Oh, there is nothing quite like the wonder of being together again with old friends.

All of this comes to mind when I look around the corner and see the Advent texts approaching once more, like friends we haven't spent time with in a little while. The Advent texts, those stories of prophecy and of hope, of fearsome preparation and impatient waiting, joy-filled stories that prepare the way for the birth that will transform what it means to be human, what it means to love and be loved, what it means, again, to believe. This year's old friends include the prophet Isaiah promising the time when a little child will lead them,¹ and Matthew's Gospel warning us that we should keep awake, for we cannot know the day or the hour of God's coming.²

I first read the Joseph story, from that first chapter in Matthew's gospel, with a quivering voice while standing at the lectern of the Presbyterian Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania, about to turn eight years old. It was the Children's Service, on the Sunday afternoon before Christmas, the same Fourth Advent Sunday when it comes up in the lectionary this year. I remember the terror of standing before that congregation, the fear of losing my place or mixing up my words. But I also remember, deep within me, the wonder that was about that *place* when I settled in and spoke aloud those wonderful words:

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of

David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”³

It is among the texts that would define my young faith, and, if I am honest, still does. Years would pass before I’d understand how deeply connected those Gospel texts were to Paul, writing in another Advent text,

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light⁴

Old friends, these texts, so dearly a part of my memory that I await the A cycle in the lectionary with joy, in the memory and comfort and certainty of being on familiar ground once more, sure of the history that we’ve shared, knowing something of the nuance of each word, excited to reconnect, relieved to be together again.

Our seminary friends’ visit lasted for a couple of days. It wasn’t on the first night, filled with laughter and wine and memories, but not so long after that when we began to realize that something was not quite the same. Was it my memory that was faulty, or were they a little different than they once had been? We are good enough friends that I mentioned this, and with gentle smiles, they suggested that we too had changed with the passing of years. How could it not be so, with the life experiences we each had celebrated and endured, and by the things we knew now that we hadn’t known then.

The old stories were trustworthy; we had indeed endured the same endless seminary lectures, and then used those notes, word for word, in our early years of parish ministry. Together we recalled the sketchy New York City car rental agency that had rented us the broken down truck we drove through many states for that first move. It was still true that our babies had kept all of us awake in the too small vacation house that we’d rented by the sea. About all of those things, we were sure.

But then, the world began to change, around us all. New questions began to emerge, some that we were well enough equipped to answer, others that required us to dig deeper, to consider new possibilities. We’d call one another, of course, and follow one another on social media. There were years when we’d exchange what we thought to be our better sermons, over email. But each passing year changes us, each birth, every death, the shifting political contexts in which we live our lives, the relationships that are new to us, and those that fall away. Some years our hopes rise, and we feel certain that God’s ways are unfolding before us, in the midst of creation’s wonder. And then there are the seasons when despots rule, and sojourners find no welcome, when we grieve the very human state in which we find ourselves.

We talked of all of these things with those old friends visiting, and we realized together that while the old stories that we shared continued to be utterly dependable, the ways that each one of us had changed mattered at least as much. These visiting

old friends were, at the same moment, new friends visiting. There was much left to discover, much to get to know in ways we had not known before. But how to do that? How do you hold on to what has been treasured, and without dismissing it, be open to all that is now being revealed?

That is the preacher's Advent question, I think, a question that is particularly important in times like these. There is such power, such wonder, such dependability in the ways that we have heard these familiar tales for our whole lives long. That sort of wonder was clear to me so many decades ago when I stood alone to read aloud from Matthew's first chapter about the newborn Emmanuel, God with us.

The joy of such a trustworthy memory need not, must not, be discarded. But even the oldest of friends live, too, in the present moment. And they deserve to be heard, and explored, and revealed again, in the midst of the present day.

When in Advent 1 we hear Paul addressing the Romans, "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light,"⁵ and Isaiah proclaiming, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more,"⁶ we are fully entitled to the delight of encountering anew such familiar words. An old folk tune might come to mind, or a sermon once preached. But if we go no farther than singing that song or preaching that sermon, we have failed to honor what those old friends are bringing to us in this new day.

Or in Advent 2, when Isaiah says, "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth."⁷ Or in Matthew's Gospel in Advent 3,

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."⁸

If you are anything like me, you hear two different things going on in each of these texts, and in all of them, when heard together. First, every word is familiar, a collection of the greatest hits of the biblical record. That part is profoundly comforting for us, and for all who will hear these stories read during the season of Advent. We have heard them and read them, taught them and loved them. They are the dearest of old friends.

But then, something else is going on as well. No one would claim that this is an intentional collection of overtly political texts. And yet, in times like these, even the most pastoral preacher will have the hardest of times refusing to hear a message that seems unavoidable for the times in which we live. I am not suggesting getting on any bandwagons, not suggesting that the time has come for every preacher to find prophetic voice, particularly among a people and in a season where that voice might just be crying in the wilderness. But if we read these texts and consider the days in which we are living, we will find sitting before us a people who are anxious to hear what the biblical word is saying to us, not just in our precious memories, but in this very day.

As you decide what to do with this collection of old voices asking us to wake from our sleep and put on the armor of light, to beat swords into plowshares, and to decide with equity for the meek of the earth, it will be difficult to consider those texts apart from the newspaper headlines of this present age. In the Advent 4 gospel text, the righteous man Joseph is determined to do only what the law requires of him, or at least allows. He will dismiss the pregnant woman quietly. He isn't turning his back, really. He is just protecting what is his, his future, his well-being, and the well-being of his own offspring. Somebody has to watch the border, after all. But then something happens to him, in his slumber. Perhaps something happens to all of us when we become dreamers, something happens when we dare to listen to what just might be angelic voices. He considers the other side of the story. And we think again about those whose very presence seemed, well, inconvenient to us. What if the one, or the ones, who asked too much of us were found to be the bearers of amazing news? The one we would have turned away might just be the way that "God with us" is revealed.

All of these texts of Advent will be read during that wondrous season between Thanksgiving and Christmas, a time of family visits, when congregations are often well attuned to the importance of the return of extended family members and of college students home for the holidays. Just as those visits with old friends make space for the telling of stories, they also invite reflection on our lives and the ways we have been changed, the ways we have been transformed, and been part of the transformation of others. Such a season invites us to consider the Advent texts with fresh eyes and consider anew how we who love this story and know it by heart might be changed again.

The biblical texts of Advent invite us to open our hearts in the presence of these trustworthy companions we've known our whole lives long. And then, they ask us to listen as if we are hearing them as never before. That new welcome, that wide-eyed wonder, will finally be the point of this season, and of the days of Christmas that will soon follow. We must make ready.

Notes

- 1 Isaiah 11:6, Advent 2
- 2 Matthew 24:42, Advent 1
- 3 Matthew 1:21-23, Advent 4
- 4 Romans 13:11-12, Advent 1
- 5 Romans 13:12, Advent 1
- 6 Isaiah 2:4, Advent 1
- 7 Isaiah 11: 3-4, Advent 2
- 8 Matthew 11:2-6, Advent 3