

Christmas Is a Thing.

Christmas is a Big Thing: from humble creches in our homes to *endless loops of A Holly Jolly Christmas*. And I am so sorry for putting that earworm in your brains! Seriously.

Christmas is a big, complex, emotionally laden, colorful, exhausting, joyous, expectational, and in its essence, a holy thing.

The Puritans, the rather severe stepchildren of the Anglican Church, banned celebrations of Christmas when they came to these shores. No celebrations, no iconography, no music. An *In the Bleak Midwinter* kind of Christmas, emphasis on *bleak*. They had no idea what was coming!

We all have Christmas imbedded in our psyches, in our pattern-seeking *neo-cortex*, in traditions older than our memories.

Christmas is a big thing, Advent, not so much. Advent is a little thing, inculcated rather than celebrated, mostly in the dark rather than illuminated by bright light. It is a liturgical season of spiritual burrowing, not for sleeping, but for encountering, the kind done on the inside, the kind done in many ways alone, the kind that empties us, that hollows us out, that makes spacious room by sifting through the soul's detritus, opening the soul up.

We have a person at the heart of this season, of this story from Luke: a fourteen-year-old girl, pregnant, no parents in sight, perhaps homeless, probably bedraggled, the despised subject of a dominant foreign power, a person of taboo, in her religious and culture world, really, an outlaw.

We might say she is a model, but really?

If she appeared on Mendo Avenue later this morning, she might get a referral to the Living Room. She might be too shamed *to go*. A fourteen-year-old pregnant girl *sans* family, no medical care, no prospects, and yes, a juridical outlaw, alone on the streets. Wow. What a model.

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

In the Orthodox East, this season is called the *Nativity Fast*. Medieval monks, and some devout believers, would fast every day of the Advent season, and some still do. That seems fitting.

Unlike Christmas, in these four weeks, we have scant symbols to guide and inform our spiritual journey inward. We have a wire circle, a symbol of the Infinite, bedecked with evergreens, signs of life and hope. We have the quartet of candles, three purple, one rose, one each week. Now, all four lit.

We have music, later today, happily, *Lessons and Carols*, and for some, Handel's *Messiah*, and the O antiphons that lend themselves to the verses of the beloved *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* and more. See *Holly Jolly* above.

And we have the dark. And we have silence. And we have ourselves. And we have the One we await.

But the *ourselves* that we have often appear all shiny, shiny with dulled edges, witty but defended, brazen but so tentative, chatty but to what end, in charge but, really, not at all.

The ourselves we actually do have are more like the advent model, Myriam, or Mary: vulnerable, broken-open, undefended, needy, afraid, outliers if not outlaws.

Mary had had this diaphanous angelic visitor last March, the intuitive fruit of her soul, who asked confounding, impossible, shattering things of her: and after a discerning New York minute, she said yes.

In Advent, the Church wisely sets aside these four weeks for us to have, if we dare, a confounding, impossible, shattering experience, too. An experience we counterintuitively need, require, and are often loathed to undertake.

Sitting in silence, with just a glint of light, all alone, we encounter ourselves as we are: just naked babies all gussied up with our many so effective ego-blandishments. They are of no value here. They provide, really, nothing. They are so often just baggage we are attached to, untrue stories we tell about ourselves or others, apocrypha that we cling to, maybe pettiness's we delight in, and projections we quickly deny throwing, defenses designed to keep us separate, unique, special—anything but our authentic selves, special and unique though as we may become. Thomas Merton eloquently said: *Jesus, this baby, leads us from our fake selves to our real selves.*

Luke has Mary trotting up into the hills—a very outlawish thing to do—to see her elderly cousin, a first cousin once removed no doubt, and as she approached her also impossibly pregnant friend, the totally unexpected baby in Elizabeth's womb *leapt! Leapt! As I*

suspect the baby in Mary's womb did likewise. These leaping boys with their kindred mothers. What a joyful tableau. The leaping harbingers of Good News.

As I attend to Advent, I think about all of this. I sense this Advent model has some refractive meaning for me, for us. And I sense that Mary was only and utterly herself. And that is all God wants of her. And all that God needs.

The tender God of John's Gospel, the yearning and disciplining God of Isaiah,
the compassionate God of Mark, the healing God of Luke: The Holy One affecting us *and always affected by us*. Responding to us. Weeping for us. Hoping for us, Illuminating our lives for us. Present—*present*—to us. Always.

This God dwells within us, in this cavern, in this very body, mine, and yours. The dark, the silent, the bittersweet alone is where we, as did Mary, encounter this God intimately, as we do when we share the bread and the wine, the body and the blood of this unimaginably self-emptying God.

An unmet teacher of mine, Alfred Delp by name, a priest executed by Hitler's goons, wrote, on small pieces of toilet paper smuggled out of his prison cell:

Advent is for the silent transformation of our hearts, that happens in fruitful silence, necessary for all authentic transformation.

God needed Mary. She could have said *no*! She was not a pre-programmed entity, no AI meme with that weird AI skin. But she had undergone some soul- blasting authentic transformation.

She said Yes. To what end: to soon birth this child that we will soon berth in our hearts, to birth Love into this world.

Similarly, or exactly, God needs me, and God needs you, needs us *by name*, to be his presence now, to the world, to each other in this beloved community of Incarnation, to our complicated families, and to this fraught planet and its many aching, hopeful souls.

God has invited us invites us into this Advent journey—two days left, plenty of time—to be still, vulnerable, risk-taking, humble, and slightly out-of-control. God invites us to be present to what is *real*.

The still small voice we hear when we are still, silent, alone, sitting in the dark, whispers: *Let me in, I want you, I need you, I love you. But only you will do.*

Mary said yes. So, hopefully, will we.

William D. Glenn
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