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Through Another Lens

Reflections on the Gospels

YEAR B

Barbara Jean Franklin, ASC



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Advent

First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:33–37

✚ The Scripture passages selected for the last days of Ordinary Time focus on the end times with strange visions and warnings to be prepared. Today's passage from one of the last chapters of Mark's Gospel fits that theme. Yet the charge to "keep awake" on this First Sunday of Advent feels different. A movement is afoot that heralds not an ending but a beginning. The people's longing for the Messiah becomes more immediate. There is an expectancy that conjures up visions of hope.

Years of conflict, turmoil and oppression, my people their
spirits subdued.

And they longed for the grace of new freedom, as the
prophets had said would come through.

Both the land and its produce so cherished, was robbed
from within and without.

Such taxes and tolls were demanded, left people with little
to tout.

They conjured up visions to hope in, and fantasized what it
would be like

To cast off the yoke of oppression and bask in the freedom
of light.

But in seeking this new liberation, they anthropocized in
extreme.
Placing trust in imperial forces that further would deplete
their dream.
The system they much took for granted was corrupt in the
heart of its core.
A new dispensation was needed, with justice and love to the
fore.
The old expectations were weary like the systems that kept
them in place.
And the false pride of this chosen people would never
deliver true grace.

Empowered for a grounded engagement, the God
with whom they'd co-create
Would stir up the forces of justice and proclaim a New
Reign at their gate.
Some saw in the wisdom I offered that this would not
challenge in vain.
And the movement it gathered momentum to become the
new dream of my reign.¹

The master in today's Gospel passage leaves his slaves in charge of the household. The faithful doorkeepers who "keep awake" are the ones "empowered for a grounded engagement, the God with whom they'd co-create." Thus empowered, they "would stir up the forces of justice and proclaim a New Reign at their gate." Each of us begins the Advent journey with that same sense of hope. And the One whose reign we announce challenges us to "keep awake."

Second Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1–8

✚ Born to an older woman who had been considered barren and an older man whose doubt rendered him silent, John, who would be called the Baptist, stands at the end of the Old Testament but also at the beginning of the New Testament. He represents the Old and heralds the New in terms of God's relationship with humanity. John's birth marks the termination not only of the barrenness of Elizabeth and Zechariah but also of the cosmic barrenness that resulted from the sin of Adam and Eve. As forerunner of the New Adam, John's message of repentance is an invitation to new life emerging from the barrenness of sin and death.

We often slide over the aspects of sin and death and focus only on the new order represented by Jesus. However, Mark opens his Gospel with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah about "a voice of one crying in the desert." The desert represents a place of barrenness and isolation.

It seems John was more comfortable in the wilderness than in the commerce of humanity. His self-imposed exile is a place of purification. Yet the ascetic Baptist comes from the heart of the desert to its edges, and it is there that he becomes a boundary between the Old and the New. In the midst of desolation and God's seeming silence, John is brought forth to prepare the people for the imminent coming of the Messiah. John becomes God's voice crying in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance that foreshadows Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit. John is the voice; the one he proclaims is the Word.

We, too, hear John's message; but often our preparation to celebrate the Word among us stands in stark contrast to John's desert call. Consider Martha Wickham's catalog of preparations—a list with which most of us are quite familiar:

The last box has been mailed,
the last card addressed
and the list assessed.
(we must be ready)
And the busy hours ahead

have tenanted my days
with lesser light.
(we must be ready)
The frantic rushing,
the pushing of one's self
to wrap the last gift on the shelf.
(we must be ready)
Sweets are baked,
freezers groan with bread and cake.
Fine wines are stored to slake our thirst.
(we must be ready)
The snow-flocked, tinsel tree
glitters expectantly
in the choice corner.
(we must be ready)
And we must prepare a room for
Him within our souls,
A Bethlehem.
(we must be ready)
For He will come and lay Himself down
in a manger within us,
Grace-filled and waiting.²

To receive the Word, John calls the people to a change in their spiritual lives, to a return to an intimate, grace-filled relationship with God. His voice resonates in the recesses of their hearts. Mark tells us that “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” John knows the Messiah as he knows his place in God’s cosmic scheme. In his baptism he invites the people to the same type of transformation.

On the Second Sunday of Advent we receive the same call from barrenness to new life. “Repent,” says John. It’s time for each of us to examine the ways we prepare “a room for/Him within our souls,/A Bethlehem./ (we must be ready)” “Repent!”

Third Sunday of Advent

John 1:6–8, 19–28

✚ Whether it's unexpected highway construction on a vacation trip or street repairs at a major intersection between home and work, none of us likes the resultant delays. Furthermore, we all know better ways to get the job done more efficiently—or so it seems as we sit, watch, and wait. Today's Gospel reminds each of us that we have our own construction and life repairs to be about: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

The voice in the wilderness is that of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Following the example of previous Hebrew prophets, John lived an austere life. Like his predecessors, he preached at a time of political, social, and religious conflict. He challenged sinful leaders, called everyone to repentance, and promised God's justice. Certainly his image and his words were not the stuff of Hallmark cards. Simply, as John the Evangelist writes, "He came as a witness to testify to the light" (1:7).

Some of the Jews had trouble understanding who John the Baptist was, so the Pharisees sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him who he was and by whose authority he preached. For them as well as for us, John's message was consoling as well as challenging. Yet it's the voice we hear as we travel through Advent. Ella Wheeler Wilcox writes:

There is no summit you may not attain,
 No purpose which you may not yet achieve,
 If you will wait serenely and believe.
 Each seeming loss is but a step to'd gain.

Between the mountain-tops lie vale and plain;
 Let nothing make you question, doubt, or grieve;
 Give only good, and good alone receive;
 And as you welcome joy, so welcome pain.

That which you most desire awaits your word;
 Throw wide the door and bid it enter in.
 Speak, and the strong vibrations shall be stirred;
 Speak, and above earth's loud, unmeaning din
 Your silent declarations shall be heard.
 All things are possible to God's own kin.³

The Evangelist makes clear John the Baptist's understanding of his role, of who he is in relation to the Messiah whose imminent intervention in human history he proclaims. Advent offers us the opportunity to seek that kind of clarity for ourselves. Sometimes we are like the Pharisees. We divert the questions from ourselves and focus on the places where other people or institutions need to be renewed. It is kind of like knowing better than the experts how to construct a highway or repair a street. Instead, let's embrace the tension of repentance and change to which we are called. Let's "Throw wide the door and bid [salvation] enter in." For we do believe, "All things are possible to God's own kin."

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:26–38

❖ In Jules Verne's novel *The Desert of Ice*, the protagonists—a group of Arctic explorers—are stranded at the uninhabited and inhospitable polar icecap. Their wooden ship has been smashed to splinters, and survival seems impossible. Verne's inventive explorers carve a lens from ice and use it to focus the sun's rays on the splinters that had been their ship. Thus they kindle a fire and keep warm until they are rescued.

Most readers get caught up in the adventure and don't reflect on the implausibility of the "fire from ice" rescue. It's just great fiction, an exciting story. Yet one hundred years after Verne wrote his novel, the editors of the journal *Scientific American* duplicated the explorers' experiment and did, indeed, kindle a fire using an icy lens.

Luke's narrative of the Annunciation can have a similar effect on his readers. We can get so caught up in the familiar dialogue between

the angel Gabriel and Mary that we lose the wonder of the key elements of the story of our salvation. How plausible is it that God would become a baby, the most vulnerable of human beings? The Incarnation is beyond our rational comprehension, and the magnitude of God's love cannot be measured by *Scientific American*. The mystery of the Incarnation can only be comprehended by faith.

When Gabriel enters Mary's life, she is engaged to Joseph. Like any bride-to-be, she must have had moments of both excitement and anxiety. She was going to be married to a man selected by her parents. She was about to begin a new life with Joseph's family, away from the home of her father and mother. It must have taken a while to comprehend the changes that would mark her new life, but ultimately they would all fit a somewhat predictable and rational pattern. But Gabriel's words take her beyond the safe and predictable life she had conjured up in her imagination. What he said to her was irrational.

Faith is not linear. It widens the imagination beyond the rational. The angel says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.... And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." Once Mary caught her breath after the angel's startling message, she asks, "How can this be?" She is essentially asking God to broaden her imagination. Only an open mind and heart can respond to such an improbable message. This is a pivotal point for Mary and in the history of humankind. Mary accepts God's grace, God's presence within her, and gives the gift back to God. She relinquishes control of her life to make room for God.

A waiting, wondering woman,
 wrapped in PRESENCE
 so deep as to be almost imperceptible.
 Moving to a mysterious rhythm
 to a melody resounding within.

MARANATHA JESU—pulsing onward—
 —accelerating with quiet intensity
 —synchronizing movements with God
 (Incarnate-Life-within)

Rise, Stand, Know...
“I have come to serve,”
Broken, Given...
FOR YOU AND NOW WITH YOU...
EMMANUEL!⁴

The great wonder of it all is that we, too, have many opportunities to invite God into our lives. MARANATHA JESU. As we anticipate the celebration of Christmas, we carefully explore the mystery of Emmanuel with hearts and minds open to surprise. Myopic vision can give way to faith in a God who is so much bigger than our narrow notions of who God is.

As Christians, can we profess to live by glorious impossibilities? We are all explorers of a sometimes hostile and seemingly godless world. It is in widening our imaginations that we welcome the rescue achieved by a baby conceived by a “waiting, wondering woman,/wrapped in PRESENCE/so deep as to be almost imperceptible.”

The mystery of the Incarnation lives on in our daily lives. The cosmic event of the Annunciation continues in each of us as we make “room for the child,” not once, but as a daily practice.

NOTES

1. O’Murchu, Diarmuid, “An Expectant Age,” in *Jesus in the Power of Poetry* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2009), 39.
2. Wickham, Martha, “Will You Be Ready?” in *To Distant Music*, (Adorers of the Blood of Christ, 2006), 101.
3. Wilcox, Ella Wheeler, “God’s Kin,” in *Simple Graces: Poems for Meditation and Prayer*, selected and introduced by Gretchen L. Schwenker and Mathew J. Kessler, CSsR (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2008), 45.
4. Fries, Andrée, CPPS, “Incarnation, 1977.”