

Bookends

As a kid growing up, my mom's mom and step-father were very non-observant Roman Catholics.

Maybe they made it to church when a child got baptized or married, but not much beyond that.

Yet one thing that was strange about them in their non-observance was this: every year they'd wait to put up their Christmas tree until Christmas Eve.

Which struck us observant family members as strange indeed, because of course our tree went up soon after Thanksgiving!

And yet, my non-observant grandparents actually had it right.

Hidden in the deep recesses, they held a memory about Advent, and its importance as a season, a season not to be intruded upon by an early celebration of Christmas.

In our overall culture, we barrel in from Halloween to Thanksgiving to the high holy days of Black Friday and Cyber Monday (did you remember to make an offering to the god of conspicuous consumption last weekend???), and then right into what we call "The Christmas Season."

And if we Christians aren't mindful, whelp, there's no doubt we shall be swept up in the storm of it all, joining our neighbors and friends like lemmings marching over cliffs as we spend and splurge and freak out at the shortness of time as we and they try to outdo one another for yet another year of consumer madness.

Which gets us to Advent — this offramp from the craziness of what popular culture has done to the mystery of Christmas — so that when Christmas does arrive, we are prepared to welcome the unspeakable mystery that is given to humanity.

In a sense, Advent is about bookends.

The left bookend is the remembrance that at a certain day and time in human history, the creator of all things became a human being, to live among us, teach us, to suffer and die at our hands, all for the purpose of showing us what a truly human life looks like.

The right bookend is about what's to come, namely:

"The second coming of Christ, the second eruption of eternity into time, which will be immediate, unexpected and conclusive, ending the human experiment, as illusion gives way to reality, and the king will be seen for who he is." JB Phillips (paraphrased).

Today, we live our lives between these bookends.

And in this in between time — what is it we are called to be?

How are we called to live?

What is our response to this Jesus who, as Paul reminds us last week, is "all in all?"

The gospel today speaks of stars falling and moons blackened — which is another way of describing what happens when a whole new way of living and thinking and feeling is thrust upon us.

We are used to a life that is measured by the Gross Domestic Product, by military power, by the value of our pension plans and the glories of

Hollywood — and these forces do their utmost to co-opt the message of our faith, to bend our faith to look like our culture — rather than bending the culture to look more like our faith.

We need only look at that large swath of Christianity that is selling out faster than lemonade on a hot summer's day to the powers that be — seeking not faithfulness to Christ — but an inside track on political power and access and prestige.

During Advent, we are invited to remember that left to our own devices, our goose is as cooked as yesterday's turkey, as Yogi Berra once said.

Where can we turn for help?

We hear it this morning in Isaiah's lament:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

Such is the prayer of the church every Advent season, it is a longing for the often silent, seemingly absent God, to show her face, in ways that are unmistakable, bold and convincing.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

It is a lament that also says much about how we understand God's relationship to us.

It is the common view that God is to be found somewhere "up there."

Many of us have a picture of that God, white-bearded, sitting on the sidelines of the world, peering over the rails on the 50-yard line, a bag of popcorn in hand, watching what we're up to.

And yet, on this first Sunday of Advent, as we gather in the midst of so much strife, so much acrimony, so much fear, we Christians are coaxed to remember that the old way of thinking, of God "up there," just ain't so.

I'm reading Eli Wiesel's first book.

It's called: "Night."

It's the story of when Wiesel was a youngster, barely in his teens, when the Nazi's came to his small village in Transylvania and kidnapped every Jewish child, woman and man, and in railroad cars barely suited for cattle, delivered these human beings into the furnaces and slave lines of Auschwitz.

It is a book one can read only slowly, just a few pages at a time.

It was during holocaust that the Jewish people came face to face with where to look for God: was God "up there" or was God somewhere else?

Some answered that God was neither up there nor anywhere else, that God, in fact, does not exist.

The horror and unspeakable sufferings of holocaust was the end of faith for many; with the greatest irony being that many of the perpetrators of these horrors believed themselves to be good and faithful Christians!

But a few of the victims were able to see God in the very midst of incomprehensible suffering.

Wiesel recounts the horrifying day when the Nazis hanged several young boys; they took a long time to die on the gallows.

An old man yells out in the midst of this horror: "Where is God?!"

And Wiesel hears his heart answer: "God is here, hanging on the gallows."

Advent is the time we gather together to remember, to re-experience, that ours is a God who gets down in the muck with us.

We'll hear it in the coming weeks.

"He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.

We turned our back on him and looked the other way.

He was despised and we did not care." Isa 53:3.

And we'll hear this: it is the response to Isaiah's king who wanted God to provide an army to Israel.

Rather than an army, the prophet promises that:

"The Lord himself will give you a sign.

The young woman will conceive a child and give birth to a son; she will name him Immanuel, God with us." Isa 7:14.

Rather than an army, God gives a child.

Rather than brute force, our God is with us in weakness.

For reasons we may perhaps someday come to understand, the Living God chooses not to enter our lives from a high and mighty place, but at

the edges, in the midst of what is troubling, confusing, even confounding.

That the new creation, which even now intrudes into our world, comes through surrender and forgiveness and mercy, because the Living God is gentle, not rescuing us from life's travails, but walking with us through all that comes.

As folks line up in the early morning hours to get the best deal at Walmart, we are called to look for a star, the sign of the one who is coming.

As the powers and principalities invite us into the wilderness of fake cheer and blown budgets, we are invited to kneel quietly in prayer, that we might be filled with the peace of God.

As nations continue to rattle sabers and politicians worship at the altar of redemptive violence, we gather together to remember who we are, to commit ourselves yet again to become a people created by the suffering God — who is nearer to you than your breath — who brings the dead to life!

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