

The Sunday Missive -- December 22, 2024
The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Hymn 73 The King shall come

The King shall come when morning dawns and light triumphant breaks;
When beauty gilds the eastern hills and life to joy awakes.

The King shall come when morning dawns and earth's dark night is past;
O haste the rising of that morn, the day that e'er shall last;

And let the endless bliss begin, by weary saints foretold,
When right shall triumph over wrong, and truth shall be extolled.

The King shall come when morning dawns and light and beauty brings:
Hail, Christ the Lord! Thy people pray, come quickly, King of kings.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq3gEtTr5lQ>

Hymn 56 O come, O come Emmanuel

O come, O King of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease and be yourself our King of Peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

The Collect of the Day

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your
Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for
himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Micah 5:2-5a

You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Psalm 80

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock* ***Shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.***

In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh* ***Stir up your strength and come to help us.***

Restore us, O God of hosts* ***Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.***

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angered* ***Despite the prayers of your people?***

You have fed them with the bread of tears* ***You have given them bowls of tears to drink.***

You have made us the derision of our neighbors* ***Our enemies laugh us to scorn.***

Restore us, O God of hosts* ***Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.***

Hebrews 10:5-10

When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt

offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Hymn 277 Sing of Mary

Sing of Mary meek and lowly, virgin-mother pure and mild,
Sing of God's own Son most holy, who became her little child.
Fairest child of fairest mother, God the Lord who came to earth,
Word made flesh, our very brother, takes our nature by his birth.

Sing of Jesus, son of Mary, in the home at Nazareth.
Toil and labor cannot weary, love enduring unto death.
Constant was the love he gave her, though he went forth from her side,
Forth to preach, and heal, and suffer, 'til on Calvary he died.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEk6XBKey0A>

Luke 1:39-55

In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the

child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Crossing the Threshold -- Advent 4C

Adventism, the attitude of expectancy, is of course far older than Christianity as a spiritual frame of reference. The Holy Scriptures contain many resonant phrases that point towards what's going to happen, for instance, "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light!" "Let us go to the house of the Lord and pray for the peace of Jerusalem, when all shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." You'd better watch out; you'd better not shout. All kinds of greatnesses will come about: the Lord's mountain will be highest of all, folks will come from all over to learn, and all will pray for peace.

We can start behaving as if we expected this to happen, despite the fact that we cannot know or predict when it will come about. If I don't know when it will be vital to be ready, I had better start getting ready now. And how different this kind of expectant life is to the one we might lead without Jesus, just keepin on keepin on; waiting for retirement and death. Even if we 'live for the moment,' 'one day at a time,' and carpe the daylight out of our diems, along with the immediacy there is a finality: "If that's all there is, my dear, let's keep on dancing." Contrast that with the sure and certain knowledge of a

day to come when all will be made well, when God will be revealed in God's glory, and sorrow and sighing will cease. For Mary, this knowledge is so sure and certain that she speaks of it as if it has already happened: "He hath exalted the humble and meek and filled the hungry with good things."

It is not so surprising that this expectation celebration of ours, this practice of having happy waiting as a frame of reference arose in ancient times as a response to the days getting shorter and shorter. People were struck with the fear that the days would just keep getting shorter til one day the sun would fail to rise at all. "Irrational," we say, we with our electric lights and furnaces and TV's. We don't know what dark is. Yet we do feel it when the nights draw in earlier and earlier. Although most clichés exist because they're true, "It's always darkest just before the dawn" isn't one of them. People repeat that phrase to get help get through uncertain times, hoping it might be true, that the next moment will be better. But in Advent, we are in the realm of 100% certainty. Just after the darkest night of the year comes Christmas, the dawn of Christ among us. Every time. No matter what's going on, whatever we're going through, howsoever we respond to the invitation, that one truth is always present: "*Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun doth his successive journeys run; his kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more.*" Just ask Isaac Watts.

Contrary to another cliché, we can't really live for today if we think there might not be a tomorrow. Maybe there really is no life after death, maybe (as Rich Anderson has cruelly posited) it's all just more Los Angeles, but we can only behave the way we want to behave if we have the expectation of peace coming to pass sometime, somewhere in the history of creation.

In anthropology, liminality (from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning "a threshold") is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during sacred rituals when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. During a ritual's liminal stage, participants stand at the threshold between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and the new way, which the ritual exists to establish.

Advent is one such liminal stage. We are on the threshold between one life and another: a life of instinct and a life of faith. Although we say the word of God existed before all other worlds, who knew it at the time? It is only when we become aware, when hearts and minds are opened to the possibilities, that humankind can move towards cooperation with God's benevolent intention. The process is an individual one, and far from universal. But slowly, if we're lucky, we come to believe that God can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and do for the World what seems impossible. Advent is a space of time, a space both in and out of time, a birth canal wherein we can, if we will, experience the coming into being of Christ in the flesh, in our very own flesh. When we experience it in ourselves, we become convinced that the World can also be healed and transformed; we are born anew.

Amongst the Jews, there are two mitzvahs – good things to do -- relating to the doorway of one's home and thereby of one's heart. A scroll is mounted on the doorpost of Jewish homes, containing this verse from the Book of Deuteronomy "*Shema, Israel, Adonai elohenu, Adonai ehad*" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is thy God; the Lord is One." The scroll is inside a little holster called a Mezzuzah; it serves to identify the home as a place of divine presence, as if to say "God is here and we know it, and you will be in the presence of God when you cross this threshold." The Mezzuzah is usually small and unobtrusive, but beautifully decorated. One reaches out a few fingers when passing through the doorway and kisses them once they've made contact with the word of God. This mitzvah is a personal, unobtrusive, habitual way of literally keeping in touch with God.

The other doorway-oriented tradition is the Menorah. Especially at Chanukah time – which begins this year on Christmas night -- the lights of a Menorah shining out from the doorway of a house (they didn't have windows) served to light up the street, to light up the world beyond one's house, to so shine before others that they might give glory to God themselves.

In Advent, we might do very well indeed to heighten our awareness of the doorways and thresholds, the liminal timespaces of our lives: our hearts, our minds, our homes and our purses. Perhaps a mezzuzah of our own. Maybe not mounted on our doorpost, but some form of a daily reminder of the existence and imminent presence of God. Before

dashing into the day's activities we might wait with God for a moment by saying "God show me the way, God give me the strength to do and to be what you would have me do and be." Or when we're done for the day, and ready to retire, we might be sure to pause for ten seconds' silence while reorienting ourselves with thoughts of gratitude and purpose.

As for lighting up the street, yes indeed our Christmas decorations count. But remember, the Menorah has only nine lights, not ten thousand, so moderation might be a good way to go. And, of course there are other ways to light up the world and spread the good news of God's love, by letting "them" see our good works, by being the change we want to see. Advent is a time of intentional, heightened observation of ourselves: our motivations and accomplishments, our failings, large or small, and also the dreams and plans we're making to change things, to change us.

We hear about, wonder about and talk about being born again as Christians. Now, keeping in mind the shopkeeper's wisecrack, "In God we trust, all others pay cash," we do well to acknowledge that declaring oneself 'born again' does not guarantee just, ethical, virtuous behavior. Nor does it entitle anybody to special rights, privileges or liberties. But through the sacrament of our baptism, through the experience of spiritually awakening to the power of love, and through the story of Jesus, we can relate to and revel in a sense of transformative newness, of rebirth, with or without a visit from the ghost of Ebenezer Scrooge.

Here in Advent, our mother is pregnant with us and nearing her due date. Shortly after the darkest night, we fully expect to be born again. Only this time we get to observe, enjoy and marvel at the miracle of our own birth. Not only that, we get to choose again, as if for the first time, the atmosphere we will breathe within our homes and the character we will exercise out in the world.

Hymn 475 God himself is with us

God Himself is with us; let us now adore Him
And with awe appear before Him!
God is in His temple; all within keep silence,
Prostrate lie with deepest rev'rence.
Him alone God we own, him, our God and Savior;
Praise His name forever!

God Himself is with us; hear the harps resounding;
See the hosts the throne surrounding!
"Holy, holy, holy!" Hear the hymn ascending,
Songs of saints and angels blending.
Bow your ear to us here: hear, O Christ, the praises
That your church now raises.

Light of light eternal, all things penetrating,
For your rays our soul is waiting.
As the tender flowers, willingly unfolding,
To the sun their faces holding:
Even so would we do, light from you obtaining,
Strength to serve you gaining.

Come, celestial Being, make our hearts your dwelling,
Every carnal thought dispelling.
By your Holy Spirit sanctify us truly,
Teaching us to love you only.
Where we go here below, let us bow before You
And in truth adore You.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQXxt7orzU>

The Perfect Poem

In god's gleaming empire, herds of triceratops lunge up on their hind legs to somersault around the plains. The angels lie in the sun using straight pins to eat hollyhocks. Mostly they just rub their bellies and hum quietly

to themselves, but the few sentences they do utter come out as perfect poems. Here on earth we blather constantly, and all we say is divided between combat and seduction. Combat: *I understand you perfectly.* Seduction: *Next time don't say so out loud.* Here the perfect poem eats its siblings

in the womb like a sand shark or a star turning black hole, then saunters into the world daring us to stay mad. We know most of our universe is missing. The perfect poem knows where it went. The perfect poem is no bigger than a bear. Its birthday hat comes with a black veil which prattles on and on about

comet ash and the ten thousand buds of the tongue. Like people and crows, the perfect poem can remember faces and hold grudges. It keeps its promises. The perfect poem is not gold or lead or a garden gate locked shut or a sail slapping in a storm. The perfect poem is its own favorite toy.

It is not a state of mind or a kind of doubt or a good or bad habit or a flower of any color. It will not be available to answer questions. The perfect poem is light as dust on a bat's wing, lonely as a single flea

Kaveh Akbar