

Come, Lord Jesus

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Last summer, I went to Ireland on vacation—specifically, to the southwestern peninsulas that make up the western edge of Europe. In the sixth century, that dramatic coastline was the end of the known world, which may explain why it is dotted with prehistoric stone circles and early monastic ruins. For hundreds of years before me, people went there to do what I did: to stand on the last possible piece of solid ground and contemplate a horizon that went on forever.

Actually, some of them went further than that. According to legend, Saint Brendan the Navigator set sail from the Dingle peninsula in a tar-bottomed curragh and found America long before Mr. Columbus did. His brothers who stayed home were no less adventurous. They had their sights set on the Skelligs—two impossibly steep rock islands eight miles off the coast of the Iveragh peninsula. Little Skellig they left for the birds. (Today it is home to 23,000 pairs of gannets, one of the largest colonies in the world.) The larger island, which they named Skellig Michael in honor of the archangel, became the site of a monastery that thrived on nothing but rain water and prayer for some seven hundred years.

It was first built after the fall of Rome, when civilization declined in most of Europe and was kept alive in the monasteries of Ireland. The beehive huts on Skellig Michael suggest some connection with the desert fathers in Egypt, who said their prayers in similar cells. The fact that those cells are still standing today is some kind of miracle. There are 2300 stone steps on Skellig Michael, 544 of them leading straight up the 714-foot island to the seven huts on the top. The idea of hauling one stone to that dizzy height is hard enough to imagine, but hauling thousands of them, over hundreds of years, is some kind of proof for the existence of God.

But the huts are empty now, because the monks are gone. For seven hundred years they survived the weather and the Vikings (who carried off their abbot in the ninth century and starved him to death). Neither of those, however, proved as devastating as monastic reform. In the eleventh century, the harsh asceticism practiced on Skellig Michael became antique. A more relaxed rule came into fashion on the mainland, and when the European orders of Benedictines and Augustinians arrived in Ireland, the local tradition of small, independent monasteries began to die out. In the thirteenth century, the monks got into their boats and rowed away from their rocky outpost for good.

No one knows for sure why they left, but it seems entirely possible to me that they just got tired of waiting. Seven hundred years is a long time to watch the horizon for the coming of the Lord. It is a long time to say your prayers and keep your fasts and live in disciplined community with one another, especially when word reaches you that those on the mainland have made some changes. They are eating better and sleeping later than you are. They have decided they can be in the world a little more without being of it, especially since it looks like they are in for a longer wait than anyone had expected.

Almost seven hundred years later, most of us can sympathize. We too have made

ourselves more comfortable during our extended wait. (What would the Skellig monks say about a clergy benefit package that includes dental insurance and long-term disability coverage?) Few of us spend our days scanning the horizon. We are embarrassed by people who compute dates for the coming of the Lord, convincing their small band of followers to stand on some hillside with packed suitcases in their hands. We packed ours so long ago that we do not remember where we left them. The millennium is less an issue for our souls than it is a problem for our computers. How shall we subdue those double zeros that threaten to turn our bookkeeping upside down?

The problem with preaching Advent texts is that they presume an urgency about the Lord's coming that few of us still feel. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," the prophet Isaiah wishes on the first Sunday of the season, but how many of us join him in that wish, or even believe in a second coming anymore? The phrase itself is suspect, both because of its stingy limitation on God's trips to earth and because of the strange theology it engenders. And yet both of our creeds assert that Christ will come again, dramatically, to judge the living and the dead.

Many of us have learned to confess that article of faith the same way we confess the virgin birth—as an ancient metaphor, not a literal fact. But unlike the virgin birth (with which we will also be confronted before the season is through), the second coming pokes at our hopefulness about the future of the earth, posing questions that go straight to the heart. Are we all alone here, or is God still in charge? If God really is coming, then why the long delay? Perhaps most importantly, how do the lives of those who are still waiting differ from the lives of those who have given up?

The Advent lections give us a chance to explore such questions, as we join the company of those who have been asking them for thousands of years now. In our own dispirited times, they offer distinct challenges to the postmodern sins of boredom, cynicism, certainty, and fear.

First Sunday: Beware of Boredom

"Restore us, O God of hosts," begs the psalmist, not once but three times, "show us the light of your countenance and we shall be saved." Here is a good epigraph for the season of Advent. Our restoration may involve repentance and amendment of life, but it begins with God's own self-revelation. Without the light of God's face, we are all shuffling our feet in the dark. With a Hebrew readiness to hold God accountable that is all but absent in Christian scripture, the psalmist rehearses God's role in the creation of Israel. "You have brought a vine out of Egypt, you cast out the nations and planted it," he writes. But that was long ago. Now the wall around the vine is broken down so that passersby pluck off its grapes and beasts of the field graze what is left. What is a vine to do without a vinedresser? "Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted."

Like the psalmist, Isaiah holds God responsible for sustaining God's people. The prophet does not deny that humankind has gone wrong, but lays at least part of the blame on God. "Because you hid yourself we transgressed," he writes. "There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you, for you have hidden your face from us." Isaiah longs for a spectacular reunion with God, one that will make mountains quake and nations tremble. His images of brushfire and boiling water may give us pause: is this reunion something we genuinely welcome? Is God really hidden, or is it our own hands covering our eyes?

In a passage richly embroidered with God's names (ten references in three sentences), Paul reminds the church at Corinth that they are not lacking in any spiritual gift as they wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ. The revelation they have already received is enough to sustain them until that revelation is complete. Christ himself will strengthen them to the end, that they may be blameless when his day comes.

Mark offers an unnerving glimpse of what the sky will look like on that day. The sun will be dark and the moon will not shine. Stars will fall from heaven to make the eclipse complete and then—when all the lights have been turned out—the son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory. He will have angels with him, who will scatter in all directions to gather the elect, whom they will sweep from the ends of the earth to the heart of heaven. The vividness of the vision is underscored by Jesus' own sense of its imminence. "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

I do not know how literalists handle this apparent mistake in Jesus' prophecy, but it works to strengthen his likeness to us. He thought God would act sooner. So did we. As human beings, we all presumed too much. Even the son of Man cannot read the mind of the Almighty. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Our ignorance of God's timetable does not excuse us from diligence, however. If anything, it increases our need to stay awake. Since we do not know when the time will come, we cannot afford to grow drowsy. "Beware, keep alert," Jesus says, not once but three times. "Keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come."

I can never read that passage without thinking of a scene in Frederick Buechner's novel *Lion Country*, in which the narrator, Antonio Parr, tends his dying sister Miriam. Her chief worry is that her death will leave her two young sons, Chris and Tony, in the care of her ex-husband Charlie. "Tono," she says to her brother one day, "the man's a bleeding ghost."

I'm not being a bitch—I cut loose, and that's that. But to bring up two boys...Do you know what I mean when I say he sleeps most of the time? I mean he often doesn't get up till noon, and when he naps, he doesn't just nap when it's raining or something but right in the middle of a sunny afternoon, for God's sake, with the kids and me roaming around in bathing suits right under his window. Sleep's his escape from life, Tono. Someday they'll have to come wake him up and tell him he's dead."¹

When the time comes, she says goodbye to her boys. They do not know it is goodbye, but she does, and when she catches her younger son yawning, she snaps at him. "Now you stay awake, Tony," she says, "You just keep your eyes open and stay awake."

They were the last words she ever spoke to him, Parr realized later, and looking back on it, "not just the words but the fire inside them, what I think she meant was stay alive. 'You just stay alive,' she told that fat little boy with his zipper half unzipped, or there would be Hell to pay."

On this first Sunday of Advent, we are clearly warned what will happen to those who fall asleep. Those who succumb to boredom will miss the master when he comes. And when they wake, they may find that they have napped their lives away.

Second Sunday: Resist Cynicism

The first sentence of the first lesson highlights a recurring problem with these texts. Certain phrases in them are so famous that they swamp the rest. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Who can hear that line from Isaiah without humming a little Handel? We are given the entire passage this morning as an introduction to John the baptizer, who appears in Mark’s gospel as the beginning of the good news.

Continuing the Advent theme of expectation, Isaiah reminds us that the glory of the Lord will be revealed, that a day will really come when we can stand on a high mountain and say in a loud voice, “Here is your God.” It is a delicious promise. After all these years of waiting, of deducing God’s presence from the most elusive clues and assuring our critics that no, we do not need more proof than that—wouldn’t it be delicious to announce the arrival of a palpable, living God?

According to Isaiah, one of the most remarkable things about that day will be the tenderness with which God acts. The Mighty One will not scorn or bully fragile creatures. The Lord will lead the flock like a shepherd, carrying lambs in his bosom and gently leading the mother sheep.

Psalms 85 repeats themes from this week and last, asking God to restore the people by ceasing to be angry with them. While there are no imperatives for human beings here, the qualities that will accompany God’s coming are named: mercy, truth, righteousness, and peace. “Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.”

Second Peter offers a two-part answer to one of our initial questions. If God really is coming, then why the long delay? In the first place, Peter suggests, “delay” is a human assessment based on our own limited experience of time. To call God “slow” is to indulge the fantasy that we know what time it is, by equating human perception with divine reality. If God wears a watch at all, it does not work the way ours do. “Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.”

His words remind me of an exhibit I once saw at the Smithsonian, in which all the ages of the earth were marked on a long, long pole. It was so long, in fact, that it would not fit into the rotunda of the Museum of Natural History. According to the sign, it began down in the bowels of the building with the creation of the earth, and emerged through the floor where we were standing at about the Ice Age. From there it went way up above our heads, where the age of humankind was marked by a thin red band at the very tip of the pole. It helped me remember that God has been around a lot longer than we have and may have more than us on his mind.

The second part of Peter’s answer is that what may seem to us like God’s slowness is really God’s patience. A less tolerant God would have locked the door on us eons ago. Our God has kept the porch light on for centuries now, in hopes that the last stragglers will find their way home.

We began our year-long encounter with Mark’s gospel last Sunday. Today we begin at the beginning. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Mark reminds us that the good news began hundreds of years before, with the forecast of a messenger. As far as he is concerned, that messenger was John the baptizer, who knew his own place in the scheme of things. He was the alarm clock—not the main event but the wake-up call

for the main event—about which he knew little for sure. If you had asked John the name of the one who was coming after him, he could not have obliged, but that minor detail did not slow him down. He was so sure of that one's coming that he spent his whole life clearing the way for him.

The triple confidence of this passage—Isaiah's, John's, and Mark's—can function as a kind of qualm detector. Where are we on the scale between certainty and cynicism? Not certainty about the details—John has already shown us that they are not important—but certainty about God's promise to come to us, in any way, shape or form that pleases God. Sometimes I worry that we have become like brave children left too long alone. We still assure those who inquire that our guardian will be back soon, but amongst ourselves we have begun to talk as if it were all up to us now. On our best days, we speak of Christ's coming not as a future event of epic proportions but as a present (though hard to describe) sense of his being with us. We offer this to those who come to us with millennialist tracts in their hands, wanting to know what they should do to get ready for the end time, and if we are not careful we will turn them into cynics too. I use the word in its gentlest sense, not to mean those who sneer at other people's beliefs but those who have begun to doubt their own. It is very hard to wait in full confidence. No one knows that better than Christians.

Third Sunday: Surrender Certainty

Now I want to talk out of the other side of my mouth, making a distinction between the kind of certainty that knows all the answers and the kind that is content to wait on the Lord. In my experience, the first kind is always irritating, often mistaken, and sometimes dangerous. The second kind is fleshed out in this morning's passage from John's gospel.

When the priests and Levites sent to interview John finally had him where they wanted him, all they got from him was a string of negatives. "Who are you?" they asked him. "I am not the Messiah," he replied.

"Are you Elijah?"

"I am not."

"Are you the prophet?"

"No."

"Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" John would not even tell them his name. As far as they were concerned, his name was, "Not, not, no," the servant of the Lord whose only identity lay in proclaiming the advent of someone else—who, incidentally, was also unknown. "I baptize with water," John told his visitors. "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal" (add two more negatives to the string).

He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light—which, for him, was not a matter of telling everyone everything he knew for sure about Jesus but of clearing a wide, straight path for that light to ride into town on. God's word made flesh was about to enter history, and John could not have told you what he looked like. He did not know him, but he knew for sure that he was coming—and that no one, no, not a single soul, had any idea who he truly was.

Six years ago I set an agenda for my summer sabbatical. I would spend a month each in Turkey, Israel, and Kenya. I would hunt Jesus in each of those places, shaking loose as many of my own cultural assumptions as I could, and when I came home I would be able to say, simply and clearly, who he was. For the first three weeks I said my morning prayers while the muezzins belted theirs out over minarets fitted with loudspeakers. I read my Bible, did walking meditation and waited for the words to come. They did not come.

Then, the week I was due to leave Turkey, I visited the Aya Sophia in Istanbul—once the jewel of Christendom, then a mosque, now a museum—where I searched for an old mosaic of Christ I had studied in school. When I finally found it, in a back corner on the second floor, it was bathed in light. Every gold tile was pretending to be the sun, and the face in the midst of them was so full of love for me that every hair on my arms stood up in recognition. Then I dissolved in tears and stood there crying without the first word to explain what had happened to me. It was the only answer I got. It was the only answer I needed, but it wasn't much to listen to. Who is Jesus? Jesus is my Lord. I don't know any more than that.

The other lessons for the day are more articulate—not about who God is but about what God will do through God's servants. The famous passage from Isaiah 61 sets down the themes that Mary will echo in her Magnificat (and Psalm 126 sings the same tune). The verses from 1 Thessalonians remind us—once again—that Jesus is coming. By admonishing his readers not to quench the spirit, Paul introduces a scary idea. Human beings actually have the power to quench God's spirit! Let those of us who do not want to do that be quick to take Paul's advice. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Fourth Sunday: Do Not Fear

Since the lesson from Luke is bound to overpower all the others today, it is hardly worth going into detail about them. That is too bad, because the lesson from 2 Samuel is an intriguing one, about God's wish for a permanent dwelling. Sending word to King David via Nathan the prophet, God says, "Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle." It is a plaintive request, but before David can answer it the subject changes to David's own house—not a house of cedar but a house of descendants, whose kingdom and whose throne God promises to make sure forever. One of those descendants will turn out to be God's incarnate dwelling place. In and through Jesus, the love of God found a lasting home on earth.

Psalm 132 celebrates the bond between God and David. Each of them has made and kept an oath to the other. Zion shall be God's resting place for ever, and a child of David's shall be set upon the throne.

The short passage from Romans is a reminder that there were long ages when no one knew the secret God was keeping. We might have lived and died without ever knowing it, but we were lucky. The mystery of divine love was revealed in Jesus in time for us to hear about it. Now we are the guardians of the story, which it would be a great mistake for us to take for granted.

Luke's story of the annunciation is one of those passages that is so well known it

is hard to hear. Few listeners make it past “the angel Gabriel” before they switch to automatic pilot. They know this story by heart. It is no longer a shocking tale of God’s tryst with a young girl but a much-painted, much-embroidered icon in the gallery of Christian art. Some preachers figure the best way to get it down off the wall is to tackle virgin birth, Davidic lineage, or first-century marriage customs. Others head straight for the time-honored conclusion that we should all, like Mary, surrender ourselves to God’s will.

A better bet, I think, is to leave the icon where it is while making contact with the emotional core of the story. It is doubtful that any of us will ever receive a proposal from God as stunning as Mary’s, yet most of us know about the fear that prevents us from answering our own angels. How many times, in the Bible, do angels say, “Do not be afraid”? Often it is the first thing out of their mouths, which is our clue that fear is the main thing standing between us and the gifts our angels want to bring us.

In today’s story, the gift is the privilege of smuggling God into the world. Gabriel does not ask Mary if she wants to do it. He tells her it is going to happen, but she apparently hears some question in his voice, because she gives her permission at the end. Either that or she knows, instinctively, that even God’s command yearns for human consent. We are not told how she overcame her fear. Maybe it was the part about how her son would sit on David’s throne. That would make her the Queen Mother. Or maybe it was the part about her cousin Elizabeth, who also had an impossible baby growing inside of her.

It is interesting that Gabriel does not punish Mary for asking how it will all come to pass, since he struck poor Zechariah dumb for asking the same thing (Luke 1.18). The angels simply answers her question, and when she has heard him out she steps into the circle of light God has prepared for her. “Here am I,” she says, like Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah before her, “let it be with me according to your word.”

Meister Eckhart says we are all meant to be mothers of God. Mary’s consent may have been the last green light God needed to be born, but she was not alone in giving birth. Centuries of prophets, priests, monarchs, and ordinary people had been in labor before her, pulling God closer to earth all the time through the force of their longing. Now it is our turn to help bring the Lord back again, by pushing through our boredom, cynicism, certainty, fear—whatever we have used to protect ourselves from disappointment while we wait—and to pray, “Come, Lord Jesus,” as if we really meant it. Whether or not our prayers are answered in our lifetimes is beside the point. To live each day expectantly, fully awake, may be as close as any of gets to the kingdom until it comes.

Notes

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Book of Bebb* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 22.