

God's absence in Advent

Every valley shall be exalted—but when?

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Tweety Bird is everywhere—on balloons, plates, napkins, cups, walls, cake, piñata and party bags. Plaster Tweety Birds mounted on styrofoam greet the guests as party favors. Everything is yellow and white.

Tonight is the baptism and first birthday party for Marta's baby, and I've brought my children, Ana and Hans, because she is their favorite baby-sitter. Neither of her brothers is home. When I ask for them, I learn that Giovanni is in jail and nobody knows where 16-year-old Christian is. *Va y viene*, they say—he comes and goes.

The children gather around the Tweety Bird piñata, eager to take a turn at slugging him to smithereens, and Christian comes in. He is wearing baggy red pants with a baggy red sweatshirt. Hanging down from his back pocket is a red bandana. Christian has joined the Bloods and is showing their colors. I remember him as a six-year-old, sweet and shy and sad. He, Giovanni and Marta lived with their elderly

grandmother because their own mother was strung out on drugs. The grandmother did her best, but her health was not good and it was hard to keep up with three teenagers. When his mother died of AIDS, Christian was 15. He sat slouched with his face in his hands, crying uncontrollably through the entire funeral. Soon afterwards, he joined the Bloods. Many times his grandmother wanted to baptize him, but the date was always canceled.

Christian sees me, smiles and comes over to give me a big hug and kiss. There is a deep scar across one cheek. Always small for his age, in my arms he seems frail. Which is probably how he feels, and why he is probably armed. Young, dangerous and endangered.

Tomorrow is the first Sunday of Advent. We will hear the prophet's vision of swords turned into plowshares. I wonder how this might happen for Christian. But now it's time to leave. The children struggle to see who can cram the biggest harvest of candy into a party bag. My own kids are in the thick of it, Ana helping the younger ones to glean stray pieces. She convinces Hans to share his Tootsie Rolls with a crying toddler who's afraid to enter the melee. When we leave, we find ourselves walking toward a fight that's about to erupt between two groups of teenagers. They are not kids I know and this isn't our neighborhood. We hurry to the car.

After the children are in bed, I put up our Advent decorations: glittery calendars, the wreath of candles, the lion and lamb, the bowl of stars, each with a name for prayer. Marta and her family are on one of the stars. For as long as I can remember, Advent has been my favorite time. Before going to bed, I read again the text for tomorrow:

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places plain (Isa. 40:4).

When will this be? The prophet's words were recorded around 2,500 years ago and I haven't noticed much movement in the right direction. The gap between the rich and the poor—Longwood Avenue in the South Bronx and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan—remains as wide as ever. We turn people away from the food pantry because we've run out of canned stew, canned beans, canned tuna, cereal and powdered milk.

Yet this is the busy season at Dean and Deluca down in Soho where my husband, Gregorio, works on his feet 12 hours a day trying to meet the insatiable demand for imported foie gras, truffles and caviar. Sometimes he wraps up single sales totaling over \$1,000.

Judging by the street tension after tonight's party, the lions and the lambs are not too close yet either. The distance between the world as it is and the world as it should be tears at my heart.

At least it's Advent. Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent I am always in sync. Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word *anhelo*, or longing. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unbearable, unfulfilled desire and the cry of *anhelo* bursts forth: Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!

Advent means coming. For Christians, God has already come in Jesus and in ourselves. God is already embedded in our being, as we confess creation in God's image. God is already reaching to our hearts through the hands of those who come into our lives. But God is also absent. Come! Come! the church cries during these four weeks. To me it is a wailing, *my* wailing.

And yet we have at times known God's presence, and it is this memory that makes us ache and feel holy absence. We don't long for someone who hasn't already deeply touched our lives. I understand this more clearly because I have a friend who is far away across the ocean. My friend's absence wounds my heart and teaches me about Advent. I remember being with my friend, and so I mourn being apart. So it is with God. If I didn't know God's presence in my life, I would not ache when God seems absent. I would not know to care. But I do.

So how do I remember God? Hans is very matter of fact on the subject. For him, there is no time when he, Hans, did not exist. Hans knows where he was before he was born. When Ana speaks of events that occurred during the first three years of her life, and pointedly comments: "You weren't here yet, Hans. You weren't born," Hans replies, "Oh, I know. That's when I was with God!" He speaks with absolute

confidence and a trace of oneupmanship—“Well, maybe you were with Mommy and Daddy, but I was with God!”

When Hans was a baby, someone gave us a tape with world music lullabies. One of the songs had a favorite tune—music from the Andean region of Peru, Bolivia and northern Argentina with reed flutes, soft drums and small guitar-like *charangos*. For me, it’s the sound of *anhelo*. Whenever I played this particular lullaby, Hans would cry, so of course I stopped playing it. I thought it strange that such a tender song would make a baby cry, the same baby whose colicky screams were soothed by holding him over a running washing machine at 3 a.m.

I experimented. Perhaps he was crying about something else. But my experiments only showed that Hans was indeed crying about the music. Later on, when he was about 18 months old and able to talk a little, I played it again. His eyes filled with tears and he said, “Music sad. No music sad.” Now he loves that music. Maybe as an infant Hans was remembering being with God. Maybe the music reminded him, arousing his tearful *anhelo*.

Somehow I too believe we all passed through the heart of God on our way to where we are. And memory stirs desire to be touched again. Presence remembered provokes the wound of absence. The luminous moments when we are acutely aware of God’s presence make the *anhelo* worse, because we are reawakened to what we are sometimes missing.

And what we are missing is not only “God.” “God” is another word requiring definition. The missing of God reverberates in the missing of a loved one and in the absence of justice, truth, goodness and grace—all those things whose absence wounds the human heart. But how do we long for a fulfillment we’ve never known? When were we touched by perfect love, truth, justice and kindness? When were we caressed with utter comprehension? When did we first hear the music whose echo now breaks our hearts?

It must have been, as Hans says, when we were with God. And so the only way to come close to it is to live as closely as possible to God now—to try and be at one with the heartbeat of life, to love and to be true, just, kind and good—to try and nudge the mountains and valleys into an embrace that heals the breach.

There is awful irony in the Christmas celebration of the word made flesh because what are we left with? Words! Sometimes I want to brush them away in annoyance.

The holy scriptures, words that come from the heart of God, arrive on this shore like letters from across the ocean. They bring a loved one near, but not nearly near enough! Why celebrate the incarnation and then go back to unsatisfying words?

For centuries, the theologians have promised us that the holy word is indeed the holy Presence. Yes, but—or as Hans would say, “Yeah, right!”—something is missing. Yes, we believe in the real presence of Christ in the sacraments. But something is missing, or why would the church, which clasps the scriptures to its breast day and night through all these years, pouring over the words for clues and comfort, wail, O Wisdom, Come! O Adonai, Come! O Root of Jesse, Come! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel! These ancient prayers are cries for understanding, strength, liberation, justice, clarity, truth, community and the perfect presence of God. The “O” antiphons moan for the closure of every distance until God is all in all.

These moans are why I feel so blessed to work in this place. Of course God is everywhere, but Jesus was clear about his unique presence among the poor, the hungry and thirsty, the naked and sick, the stranger and the prisoner. I feel close to life in this place, blessedly alive. It is life in the face of death here, where the distances of class, race and gender are most acute. Here is where the valleys cry to rise up and meet the hills—and here love comes to level out uneven ground and make rough places plain.

When will the work be finished? The wait is nearly unbearable. “Soon and very soon!” we sing each Sunday. “No more crying, no more dying, no more hunger, no more fighting!” We sing at the top of our lungs. We clap. Outside a siren’s high-pitched wail goes racing toward the next crisis. Soon can’t come soon enough.

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