

Homily - December 1st, 2024 - First Sunday of Advent



Back in 2008, I remember being on a retreat in the foothills of California. Before being sent off to spend 8 hours by ourselves in nature, we were given a few instructions the night before.

Since this was supposed to be solitary time, we were to go far enough into the forest and mountains that we couldn't see another person. We were to draw a circle in the dirt with the heel of our shoe or with a stick, and we were to sit in that circle for eight hours. A hat, sunscreen and a bottle of water were our only provisions. Lastly, with only God and nature for company we were to "expect everything but nothing in particular."

When you expect everything but nothing in particular, you cannot program what's supposed to happen. To enter prayer, or a new job, or a marriage, or a vacation with concrete expectations of how it is supposed to unfold--it's supposed to unfold perfectly, according to my plan--is to create a fantasy world which is bound to disappoint. It's the disappointment of a child on Christmas morning who pictured what she wanted for Christmas but didn't get it.

Here's the twist, though. While you might not get what you wanted, you may receive something far better than anything you were expecting. Just be open to it. Ever since that retreat, I've tried to approach Advent and life that way: Expect

everything but nothing in particular. When you pray expecting everything but nothing in particular, you are praying the most daring, the most mature, and the most open-ended prayer you could possibly pray. You are no longer praying for little red wagons under the Christmas tree. You're praying, instead, that your will (God's will) be done. That's the prayer of Mary at the beginning of the gospels. When the Angel Gabriel comes to her with the unbelievable news—and it was unbelievable—that she would be the mother of the messiah, her response was open-ended, mature, and daring, "Let it be done according to the words you just spoke to me." Let your will be done in and through me, even if I don't understand it now. I'll let go of my need to know everything and my need to control outcomes, and I will allow the Mystery to unfold as it was always meant to be. That's also the prayer of Jesus at the end of the gospel. On the night before his crucifixion, while praying in the garden, he says almost the exact words as Mary once said when he says, "Father, not my will but yours." It's a mature, daring, and open-ended prayer, just as Mary's was.

Jesus, in today's gospel, speaks about how the sun, the moon, the stars themselves will point to distress among nations and how the sea and waves will threaten our survival. People will shake in their boots at what is coming to the earth, even the powers of heaven will be shaken. I can see how just watching the news, and seeing the destruction of the planet, and seeing images of war, suffering, refugee camps, spousal violence, fraud, etc. might further the idea that we're all on the slippery slope to hell. Add to the mix all the crazy doomsday "prophets" on the internet, and it's not difficult to figure out why stress, fear and anxiety get ratcheted up in people. Add onto that twisted theologies and

radicalized religious leaders who prey on peoples' fears, and pretty soon you have depressed and despondent people who almost look forward to the destruction of the world as we know it. Even though I sometimes can't stomach an entire hour of news, which tends to be mostly negative, I try not to let myself get drawn into that depressing drama. My faith tells me there is another drama, another story, a more positive and enduring story unfolding underneath world events and personal struggles. God is still in charge. From a secular perspective, we say, "Things have to get worse before they get better." From a faith perspective, we say, "First the Cross, then the resurrection. First the destruction of all things, then the reconstruction."

When the ground beneath our feet seems to be falling apart, the Son of Man is the new earth, the new place to stand upon. St. Paul says it in a slightly different way, but he makes the same point, does he not, when he says, "When everything falls apart, decays, and is no more, faith, hope and love will still be standing. And the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). Jesus is the embodiment of love. He is the ground upon which we stand and place our hope. He has not come to destroy us or the earth. He has no vested interest in destruction, only renewal.

When you get weighed down with the sheer heaviness of life itself, Jesus says be alert and pray. Here's something to be alert to and here's something we can ponder in prayer: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). There is no doomsday destruction, no perishing, in God's plan for any of us. What a blessing it would be to view things, every day, with eternity in mind. In other words, to have

the big picture, to have God's perspective on life, to see where all of this is ultimately going. I think Advent is given to us to not only look back on where we have been but to look ahead with an eye to the future. God has a future full of hope. The prophet Jeremiah, who we heard from in that first reading, says, "God has a plan for each of you and for all of creation, plans for peace, not disaster" (Jer. 29:11).

Perhaps Advent can be a time where we ask for the big perspective, God's perspective. Gaining perspective reminds me of the Seven Generations Principle that guided the Iroquois. The seventh generation principle says that every decision, be it personal, governmental or corporate should take into consideration how it will affect our descendants seven generations into the future. This is long-term thinking. This is the big picture.

It reminds me of Jesus. Before his inaugural speech, which we call the Sermon on the Mount, he does something very interesting even before he speaks a single word. It says that he went up the mountain and then he addressed the crowd with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." By going up the mountain, he is going to tell us what God sees when God sees us. Jesus is going to give us the truth, the big perspective, as only God knows it. Unfortunately, the Beatitudes (all that blessedness) are the least quoted part of the gospels in any official Church documents. We seem to prefer our little perspective over God great perspective.

A story from Robert Wicks, a psychologist and spiritual writer, may illustrate this.

Many times, in my life, I lost perspective until I heard of a neurologist right here on the West Coast who said he had the same problem. Then he did something very dramatic in his life...he sent his first daughter away to college. He said, instantly, he lost perspective. He said the first semester she practically failed out, and he worried, in the second semester, that she would fail out and take his money with her. And in the beginning of the second semester, he said instead of worrying about neurology and the sub-arachnoid in my patients, I was worried about her. And then he received a letter from her that helped him gain perspective. And the letter said, "Dear Dad, I've never been as happy as I am at this point in life. You would love Ichabod. He's a wonderful, wonderful man, and our first three months of marriage have been most blissful." And she said, "More good news, Dad, the drug rehab program that we're both in, has just informed us that the twins, that are due in two months, will not be addicted at birth." Turning the letter over with trepidation he read on, and it said, "Dad, there is no Ichabod, I'm not pregnant, and I haven't abused drugs, but I did get a D in chemistry so keep things in perspective.

(Robert J. Wicks, "Friends for the Journey")

This Advent, expect everything, but nothing in particular. You won't be disappointed.

~Fr. Phil