

PRELUDE TO OUR ADVENT WORSHIP

Ben Franklin said it well. “Serving God is doing good to others, but praying is thought an easier service, and therefore more generally chosen.”

These four Advent worship gatherings will be an opportunity to participate in that easier service to God – that of prayer. But I have found that prayer alone is good for little if it does not focus – or in the case of Advent, perhaps refocus – our words into action. Contrary to popular opinion, I believe the efficacy in prayer is not about asking for things, often impossible or unnecessary things. It’s more like a self-reality check; where we prepare to re-engage ourselves in another reality than the illusory one into which we continually tend to backslide when the watchword we call prayer is neglected.

As a matter of fact then, the deeper reality which we prepare now to recognize, observe and celebrate at the end of these four weeks is all about the Word becoming a living reality, and dwelling among us. We approach this time of Advent prayer and worship together; so that the words of our lips might direct the actions of our hands and feet.

The themes I’ve shaped for these four evenings together are intended to direct your attention outward to what we might do outside this hour and these four walls. It emerges out of my own peculiar understanding of human nature, being what it is; as well as a personal understanding of what is authentic about Christian faith, as it has shaped up in my own life, and up to this point in that personal pilgrimage. So with that I will develop four general themes:

First: Castaways in light armor: Humility in the face of our mortality, drawn from the Collect Prayer for Advent I.

Second: The Powerlessness of Prophets vs. Principalities & Powers: Un-favorable Odds and Risks with the Secrets of the Heart, drawn from the scripture texts about prophets.

Third: The Costliest Christmas: about a world, which is in desperate need of a different kind of excessiveness than one generally practiced during the holidays.

And fourth, on what is commonly referred to as “Mary’s Sunday,” about being hospitable in an inhospitable world: It’s about the art and craft of knowing when to accommodate, and when to stand your ground. Mary, mother of God, has something to say about that.

Now first:

CASTAWAYS IN LIGHT ARMOR: HUMILITY IN THE FACE OF OUR MORTALITY

*Give us **grace**, to cast away the **works of darkness**, and put on the **armor of light**, now in the time of this **mortal life** in which Jesus the Christ comes to visit us in great **humility** that in the **fullness of time**, we may more fully rise to immortal life.*

This Collect Prayer for the first Sunday of Advent season reeks with such melodramatic language! It sounds more like the stuff of mythic legend, “casting off works of darkness,” with “armor of light,” isn’t exactly the most apt description of the way we would normally characterize the day-to-day issues of our much more domesticated, pedestrian lives.

At the same time, there is an unmistakable, palpable sense of fear and foreboding in the air. The days are getting shorter and the night’s longer; and no matter what anyone says, everyone has – at one time or another – been scared of the dark. Besides, this is the onset of the season of SAD – seasonal affect disorder; whose affects may, in fact, be more contagious than any seasonal virus.

Granted, for some it’s only a slight problem. For instance the other day we learned from our daughter whom we call the *Dog Whisperer*, that Sally the golden retriever’s nose is turning from black to pink these days because the natural genetic pigmentation does not require the darker shade of protection from the hot summer sun. It’s not really a problem for Sally, and she doesn’t really care what she can’t see herself anyway. It’s a dog’s life, one way or another; which, for a dog, is just fine.

But for others of us, for one reason or another, it's a time and a season for the works of darkness to seemingly run amuck.

This is the point where a preacher would typically fill in the blank, based on the particular "conditions on the ground." In homiletics (preaching) we have a term for this. It's sometimes referred to as the "category of vices;" the particular afflictions, social ills and infirmities that happen to beset us at any particular time.

The headlines are always full of such examples. That harvest is always plentiful. Take your pick: Big picture arms-length problems like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Iran, the Korean peninsula, Darfur, worldwide pandemics that make H1N1 look like a sneeze, financial greed and corruption, the ensuing economic meltdown with the innocents caught in the mix, global environmental crises, etc, etc, ad infinitum. Here's just one:

On Tuesday the President will presumably tell the American public how many more troops he will give his generals to wage war in Afghanistan; along with a rationale for doing so. Then competing polls will attempt to gauge the public's reaction, while others tally the costs in terms of blood and treasure and political capital. It is the way of this world, it seems; the reality contending with the works of darkness run rampant in the world.

What would it then mean to instead be castaways, as we say in our prayer this evening? To cast off "works of darkness" and put on "armor of light," as if our mortal life depended on it?

One might well consider a global war on terror as a conflict with the works of darkness. Certainly there are the Darth Vaders out there; and with the military's latest light sabers at the ready, conventional logic could persuade us we just need to persevere and escalate our efforts to rout out evil from wherever it lurks. That's why we'll ship additional defense forces halfway around the world, and put more boots on the ground in a foreign, sovereign state; in order to protect our borders from the enemy's ability to regroup and launch further attacks on the homeland.

The tragic irony, of course, is that the last extremist/fanatic to attack us on American soil

allegedly turned out to be an American born medical professional within our own very military force itself; a psychiatrist trained to understand and treat the human psyche, whose job it was to debrief our foot soldiers returning home from battling the works of darkness abroad.

Now pointing fingers want to find out how warning signs -- presumably so obvious to everyone in retrospect -- were previously overlooked; along with the underlying assumption that if we can finally, once and for all, learn from our mistakes so that in the future we do everything right, nothing will ever go wrong again. And, part of that is about making sure everyone is sufficiently "enlightened;" so we can tell the difference between works of darkness and light before it's too late. But the days are short. They're always short.

How then does one contend with the works of darkness, if one only has light armor, or "*light*" armor?

The truth of the matter is, exposing the works of darkness to the light of day does not, in fact, vanquish the darkness. Just as merely pointing out what is ultimately true does not necessarily make what *is true* prevail. Ignorance and brutality, it seems obvious to me, are blind and belligerent for a reason; and that reason just may not be because they have not yet "seen the light."

It is an inconvenient truth, for instance, that violence in any form only begets more violence. Engaging in acts of violence does not put an end to violence; but rather only quells violence, at best, as long as one of the two embattled parties has a bigger stick. It is the conventional compromise when confronting global terrorism, for instance. But such misrepresentation of this truth does more than fill coffins and drain the treasury coffers. It misleads us into believing something is the truth, when it is actually something less than the truth. The containment of violence by violent means can only masquerade as an often-promised "just and lasting peace."

But here's another truth, it seems to me. Light armor can't hold a candle against the works of darkness. It is a losing proposition. And, as unwelcome a message as that may be to the impending days of holiday mirth and merriment that is nonetheless part of the message of Advent

and this prayer. Not only are we invited to be castaways, equipped with little more than light armor that won't afford us a triumphant victory over the "works of darkness." We are also shown how to undertake such a losing proposition as imitators of the one who "came to visit us in great humility."

Humility! Humility is offered up as our best defense, and our best offense, when neither strategy can triumph in the end; as if winning or losing isn't the point.

I have found two paradoxical realities at the heart of a life of faith. The first one is about us. It is about what was once dubbed the paradox of the "fortunate fall" of humankind; wherein we not only accept our imperfection (and our mortality); but also come to realize our utter dependence on the sheer grace of God, and the redemptive life to be found once we've given up the illusory quest of self-salvation.

The second paradox is about what others have described as the "magnificent defeat" of God. And such a losing proposition does not end with God. For those who cannot conceive of our lives as being anywhere but in God, it is our defeat, as well.

If Advent is about preparation, I believe it is about preparing ourselves to recognize this revelatory truth when it comes to us. It is not simply the bargain we (knowingly or unknowingly) strike when we draw our first breath, and until our last. It is the good news that the One in whom our life is held "comes to visit us in great humility," "now in the time of this mortal life." The Word made flesh is this truth for us to behold.

If the notion of even a *magnificent* defeat is an unwelcome proposition, consider this: life is a losing proposition. Try as we might to have it turn out any other way, mortal nature being what it is eventually brings us to this sobering conclusion. Each of us can ask ourselves: Who or what, in the end, will lead to our ultimate defeat. But we lose, one way or another. What then can we possibly gain, even more so with a *magnificent* defeat?

When Paul writes his letter to the early Church in Philippi, sitting in a prison cell in Rome, we can get an idea of what can be found in such defeat: "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing

Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ." [Phil 3:8]

For those of us who've lived long enough to suffer a loss or two, we might end up asking ourselves where is the gain to be found in such defeat. It is only when one comes to see and know how one is lifted up, time and again, by the magnificence of God's own humility, that one can consider all else to be "rubbish." Humility then, as the Collect Prayer says, is the vulnerable, disarming, self-defeating manner in which Christ comes to dwell among us.

Humility is often given a bad rap. If it's not cast in pious terms, as an endeavor reserved for the professionally religious, it's just as often regarded negatively as either self-deprecation or false piety, i.e. "I'm tops in humility!" Jesus had a penchant for pointing out such hypocrites. Humility is the opposite of pretense. Humility is simply the refusal to someone you are not, and accepting who you are, without pretense.

For those who remember (to my chagrin) the musical antics of Fr. Cowboy and the Buckaroos singing silly religious country western tunes a couple decades back, among the standards in my repertoire were the lyrics,

Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble,
when you're perfect in every way.
I can't wait to look in the mirror, I
get better lookin' each day, ... etc.

As with most things, it's always easier to describe what humility is *not*. But another song we'll sing this evening gives us reason to so a little pondering about humility as an authentic way of for us to make our way through this world:

When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cows stall,
With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall,
And the promise of ages it then did recall.

If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
A star in the sky or a bird on the wing,
Or all of God's angels in heaven to sing,
he surely could have had it, 'cuz he was a king.

So, I wonder as I wander out under the sky
Why Jesus the savior did come for to die
For poor ornery sinners like you and like I,
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

The works of darkness run rampant, and we are called to be castaways in light armor. Time and again we will lose, going down to utter defeat along the way. We pray to accept such a proposition, knowing we can share in God's magnificent defeat.

Many years ago F. Buechner wrote, "Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the Resurrection, bearing on his body the proud insignia of the defeat ... the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God."

He wrote that line, preceded by this proposition, "Power and dominance can be grasped for a while by those who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God.... "

To that list I would add another gift, if I can only accept it; the gift of humility. It is the magnificent defeat of the human heart at the hands of God.

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