

Waiting in Expectation
First Advent: November 28, 2009
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*May my words be a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.*

December

*First snow! The flakes,
So few, so light,
Remake the world
In solid white.*

*All bundled up,
We feel as if
We were fat penguins,
Warm and stiff.*

*Downtown, the stores
Half split their sides,
And Mother brings home
Things she hides.*

*Old carols peak,
The dusk is dense.
There is a mood
Of sweet suspense.*

*The shepherds wait,
The kings, the tree—
All wait for something
Yet to be,*

*Some miracle.
And then it's here,*

*Wrapped up in hope—
Another year!*

This piece by John Updike, who is better known as a novelist, is one of twelve children's poems in *A Child's Calendar*, which our son Charlie received when he was born. This simple poem captures a child's excitement at the first snow and the coming of Christmas. But it also evokes beautifully the longing of the human heart for a better future, whether it be in the form of a bright new year, with clean snow and brilliant skies, or in the arrival of a savior who will right all the wrongs in the world.

That hope is as old as the human race. We can hear it reflected in today's reading from Jeremiah:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

God's promise to the beleaguered Hebrews that they would be God's people, a promise that evolved into the notion of a "savior," was embedded in Hebrew theology. Indeed, God's promise **became** their story:

- from Noah, who saw the rainbow in the sky as confirmation that God would never destroy the world again
- to Abraham, who received God's assurance that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky
- to Abraham and Sarah, who received angelic visitors on a hot day in the desert: visitors who promised that the aged Sarah would bear a son
- to Moses, who heard God speak from burning bush and thunderous mist.

For them, God was real, present with them in power and majesty: fire, smoke, clouds, thunder, even a "still, small voice" that shook them to their roots. And so they understood that the promised "redeemer" would be a mighty king who would destroy their enemies and bring them peace and pre-eminence among the nations.

When the promised savior was born to poor parents in a shelter built for animals, and when that child became an itinerant preacher who died a shameful death, most of the Hebrews missed the event. They saw a renegade, someone threatening a

way of life that had become entrenched in the law. Their sense of God's presence, so alive in much of the Old Testament, had disappeared. Somehow, in the centuries after Abraham stood with God, gazing at the stars in the sky, the Hebrews moved God from the earth into an unknowable kingdom, symbolized by the temple, a place not readily available to all of God's people. They were not prepared for an earthy God. They wanted someone who would take them out of the world they knew, not someone who would take on human form, living and dying as they did.

Today, we begin our journey through Advent. The days are short now, and after a mild November, the cold and the threat of snow has arrived. In this season, we echo liturgically the hopes and dreams of an ancient people who awaited their redemption through long centuries of seeming darkness and cold. The wait for us is not so difficult, for we know their story, and we believe that in Jesus the redeemer arrived two millennia ago. We also know that Jesus did not come to destroy Israel's enemies, but to teach them how to live IN the world, how to live well despite the problems that surrounded them. And not only that, but he came to show them—and us—that as children of God we share in God's power to change the world.

Iraeneus, a second-century Church father influential in forming early Christian theology, wrote the following, which has been adapted and translated for the modern ear:

*The tender flesh itself
will be found one day
—quite surprisingly—
to be capable of receiving,
and yes, full
capable of embracing
the searing energies of God.
Go figure. Fear not.
For even at its beginning
the humble clay received
God's art, whereby
one part became the eye,
another the ear, and yet
another this impetuous hand.*

*Therefore, the flesh
is not to be excluded
from the wisdom and the power
that now and ever animates
all things. His life-giving
agency is made perfect,
we are told, in weakness—
made perfect in the flesh.*

What would Abraham, Sara, Jacob, and Moses have thought about that statement? What do WE think about the notion that Jesus took on human flesh to teach us that these bodies we inhabit are good? And that we share in God's creative power to do good using these imperfect bodies? I was thinking about that as we left CMU's football game on Friday afternoon. It was cold and windy, and so everyone was bundled up, hats pulled down almost to their eyes, scarves wrapped around necks and chins. We all looked ridiculous, truth be told, but it occurred to me that we are all made in God's image—that God has entered into us—no matter what we look like on a freezing November day.

I think that John, writing the introduction to his Gospel, understood this quite well. After theologizing about Jesus as the “word” of God, John says that “the word became flesh and lived among us.” In that act, God became more than a theology: God became real, made of flesh. Of course, not everyone in the early years of Christianity believed what John said, or what Iranaeus wrote in the second century. Paul struggled with what he saw as the superiority of the spirit over the body. He believed that the spirit should suppress the desires of the body. The Church fathers quarreled over the combination of humanity and divinity in Jesus, declaring heretics those who did not agree with them. Today, these quarrels make good material for questions on ordination exams: I know, I had to answer one of them!

But they don't help us much in coming to terms with the hard work of living in these bodies on this earth. When I was twenty years old, I wondered whether I could be both intellectual and emotional—something like Paul's wrestling with the physical and the spiritual. I realized eventually that I was both, a complex combination of what is visible and what is invisible. As are we all, for this is how God made us, and, in the words of Genesis, God saw that his work was good. Jesus came to affirm this goodness, to assure us that we are all children of God. That we share in God's creative energy.

These are weighty thoughts to carry through these short weeks before the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem. These weeks are shorter by centuries than the bleak years the Hebrews awaited their salvation, fewer by months than the time the young woman Mary carried the child Jesus in her body. But they can be for us a time rich with hope for this world that still walks in darkness after all these years. Like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Mary, and so many who have gone before us, we can say “yes” to God. We too can bring light into the world. We can embrace the real power of the incarnation, the realization that our lives—and the lives of everyone who lives on this earth—are a gift from God, and a reflection of God’s love.