



2017
Advent Reflections



CATHOLIC MOBILIZING NETWORK

First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017



by *Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy*

Waiting is contrary to human nature. The idea of being idle goes against the grain for easily distracted people of modern times. Our highly technical, secular and individualized culture says there are simply too many things to get done, accomplish and achieve. The motion of busyness can be more of a comfort than the dullness of waiting.

Yet here we find ourselves in Advent, the liturgical season of “waiting.” What special gift is God offering us from this exercise of waiting?

Advent is a time to look back and remember that Christ became incarnate in the world through Mary giving birth to Jesus and laying him in a humble manger. Advent is also a time to look ahead and anticipate what scripture says...that Christ will come again, at some unspecified time of judgment. Advent reaffirms that Jesus Christ has come and will indeed return.



Simply put, we live in a reality of “already and not yet.” In between this remembering and anticipating, the season of Advent calls us to “Be watchful...Be alert” (MK 13:33) in our waiting.

So what is the gift? During Advent, we begin to learn that waiting is anything but dull or boring. It allows us to pay attention to a different perspective; that which is unseen, beyond our control, out of sight and without physical evidence. Watchful and alert waiting is countercultural for most, likely counterintuitive for many and most certainly not easy. But the gift of this kind of vigilance is that it holds the power to cultivate in us a deeper recognition of God’s plan. The prophet Isaiah likened this to the process of molding pottery, “we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.” (Is 64: 2-7)

Watchful and alert waiting can reveal to us God’s intention to bring about love, justice, and mercy in our world. As we deepen our recognition that Christ came to us in humility--not might--to become light for the world, God’s love, justice, and mercy becomes ever bright. In the light of this physically darker season, we might better perceive the violations and harms happening in our world as contrary to God’s vision.

I invite you to ponder one such violation this Advent. In our watchful and alert waiting, the still too common practice of death penalty persists as one of the gravest killing systems of our time. Pope Francis recently called the death penalty “contrary to the Gospel” and “inadmissible because it attacks the inviolability and the dignity of the person.” Currently, 31 states still have the death penalty. Ten states are extremely active in death sentencing--Texas, Florida, and Nevada. Nearly 3000 people today sit on death row. Disadvantaged poor people and people of color are disproportionately represented on death row. The recent statement by our Holy Father draws renewed attention to this violation of God’s plan for a kind of justice that allows rehabilitation and restoration. The practice of execution is a turn away from God’s mercy and a rejection of God’s love.

Perhaps this season of waiting will instill in us a renewed sense of God’s immense love for us in sending God’s only Son, Jesus, to become incarnate in our world. Over the next four weeks, may our discipline of watchful and alert vigilance be a time to understand more fully God’s plan for love, justice, and mercy. May the Advent liturgical movement within our hearts allow us to advocate for an end to capital punishment in our country.

Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy is Managing Director of Catholic Mobilizing Network. She is co-author of Advocating for Justice: An Evangelical Vision for Transforming Systems and Structures.



Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017



by Fr. Dustin Feddon



Those returning from Babylonian Exile were trudging through new territory, having survived traumatic experiences brought on by their captivity and exile, these sojourners were trying to render meaning to the ancient promises of their God in the aftermath of their spiritual and physical confinement. These were people emerging from the throes of uncertainty and despondency. We catch a glimpse of their profound religious and social crisis when we read in Isaiah 42: "a people robbed and plunder all of them trapped in holes and hidden in prisons." And yet it is precisely in this moment, as the children of Israel emerge from the darkened caves of exile back into their homeland, that a message of profound hope and restoration is shared with them through Isaiah.

When it comes to capturing the élan of the prophetic voice it is hard to find a more apt interpreter than the great Jewish rabbi and theologian Abraham Heschel. With pithy insights, Heschel recovers the sublime content of their divine speech reminding us just how astonishing is their vision of our world under heaven's gaze. Heschel states that the task of the prophet and God was to bring meaning to the past and present misery of Israel: "to comfort is to throw a glimmer of meaning into a cave of wretchedness." For Heschel this is why we hear Isaiah's cry, "Comfort ye, comfort ye My People, Says your God (Isaiah 40:1).

Who among us has not experienced some degree of social isolation, marginalization, or humiliation? Whether it is through political disenfranchisement, alienation among family or friends, or even estrangement within our own self, most of us know something of being exiled. Any form of estrangement can imprison us from meaningful and intimate relations with others and even our God. For this reason, it is essential those invested in the "comforting of Jerusalem" be self-aware so that we may empathize with exiles and their loss. Do we not identify ourselves as such when we pray: "poor banished children of Eve?" The question isn't so much whether or not we have experienced exile--we have!--but rather to what degree do we allow God's grace to transform our exile into a work of restoring our fellow exiles?

These four verses in Isaiah (40:1-4) express a mission for the Church in today's overly carceral state. Isaiah is speaking to us, challenging us to speak to the heart of those returning into our communities after years of banishment and isolation. Isaiah is speaking to us that we might bring meaning to those who have lived in deprivation and estrangement. With roughly 650,000 to 700,000 of our sisters and brothers reentering our communities every year perhaps it is us, those of us who know something about being exiled, who are especially capable of attending to them with comfort and care. As a people, whose narrative hinges on a comprehensive belief in redemption, we are primed for welcoming those who were once condemned.

My hunch is that our capacity to "dare to hope" for our own redemption is mysteriously interlinked with the redemption of those around us struggling to find their place again among us. So may we hear those words, nay the cry, of the prophet as a profound command to bring comfort to those exiled in our communities as we have been comforted by our merciful God.

Fr. Dustin Feddon is originally from Birmingham, AL. Fr. Dustin attended FSU where he received a doctorate in Religious Studies in 2013. While working on his Ph.D. he was ordained a priest in 2016 serving in the diocese of Pensacola – Tallahassee. Currently, he is serving at Saint Theresa's parish. For the past 4 years, he has served extensively in prison ministry throughout North Florida.



Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2017



by Alexandra Carroll

As we continue to wait in hopeful anticipation for the coming of our savior, we are confronted by a society affected by injustice and violence that is contrary to the gospel message. One example that penetrates several aspects of our society is the continued use of the death penalty. In the last year, over 20 individuals were executed, many of whom had claims of innocence, severe mental illness or intellectual disability, came from situations of poverty, and were people of color. The persistence with which the death penalty remains in our society stands as an affront to our Catholic call to restoration and reconciliation. How are we to reconcile this injustice with the promise and joy of Advent?



The third Sunday of Advent, traditionally understood as Gaudete Sunday, invites us from a time of holy anticipation into one of spirit-filled action. Filled with excitement for the coming of Christ, we are challenged to rise up and bear witness to the coming glory by preparing the way.

The first two weeks of Advent have invited us to enter into a time of anticipation and waiting. We know the birth of Christ is near and that soon the glory promised to God's people will be present in our midst. This week we are reminded of just what it is we are waiting for and how we are invited to participate in the earthly mission of Christ.

Anointed with the Spirit, Jesus will come to fulfill the promises of God made in the Hebrew scriptures (Is 61:1). This week is the only time in Advent that the promised glory and freedom is given concrete examples. They reveal the countercultural mission of the coming Messiah: glad tidings to the poor, healing to the brokenhearted, freedom for the captives and release of the prisoners (Is 61:1).

It's significant that on this penultimate week of Advent, the true meaning of God's justice is revealed. The coming of God will bring about a justice and peace in our society unlike any we have seen before. The meaning and full extent of God's justice can now be fully understood and we can no longer ignore the contrast we see in our society. This proclamation of what is to come is meant to be presented, discussed and adopted by the Christian community (1 Thess 5:22-24). We are challenged to unite together, under our shared faith in Christ. The community of believers, in addition to political parties and elected officials, are to attend to the demands of justice as we prepare for the coming of Christ.

This is the call of Advent, to not only wait but to witness to the coming of Christ. Just as John the Baptist served as a living testament to the promises to come in Jesus (Jn 1:6-8) we too, must announce the coming joy of Advent. We must rise up and shout the good news that is upon us. We are invited to take on the role of John the Baptist and work for justice in our time. Our living witness serves as a precursor and acceptance of the reality that is to come in Christ. Unlike any who have come before him, Jesus will baptize not with water but with the spirit and the promises of God will be fulfilled (Jn 1:26).

This Gaudete Sunday, I invite you to be that living witness. Prepare the way by joining the work to end the death penalty and create a more restorative criminal justice system. Help to bring about the transformation of our society where relationships are restored, harm is healed, and violence is replaced by reconciliation. The time of Christ is near. Are you ready?

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Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 24, 2017



by Julie Penndorf



The readings for this last Sunday of Advent focus on how God has chosen us all to be part of a chosen people, regardless of who we are or what we have done.

In the first reading, we are told how God chose David to be the leader of God's people – David, who had been a sinner in every sense, a sinner who had gone so far to murder the husband of the woman he lusted after. And yet, Nathan is told to tell David “I have been with you wherever you went, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you. And I will make you famous like the great ones of the earth (2 SM 8).” God saw goodness in David, even though he was a sinner, and God blessed David greatly.

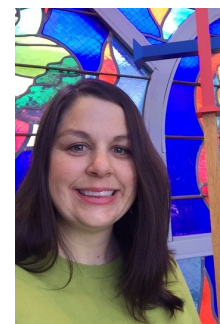
In the Gospel, we hear the story of Mary being chosen to be the mother of God. Mary, a young, pure woman, was chosen as the vessel through which God would become flesh. She is nearly the opposite of David.

The distance between David and Mary – his sinfulness, his pride, her simplicity, her holiness – are the spectrum across which all people fit. God's love is so great, God can choose a poor, uneducated young person, or an older, arrogant, adulterous murderer, and enable them both to serve God for the greatest good. And nearly all of us fall somewhere between these two. God was able to take David's sinfulness, guide him to reconciliation, and lead him to be a great leader of Israel for 40 years. God was able to take a simple, uneducated, small town young woman, and form her into being both God's greatest servant and most important human to exist.

So where can God lead each of us, whether we are more like Mary, or more like David? God has a great plan for each of us, and God's love and mercy can enable those plans to happen. But in order for these plans to happen, in order for all of us in between David and Mary to serve the Lord, we must be given the chance, and we must be allowed repentance when necessary.

The work of the Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN) is precisely where God has put people in charge of this task. David is proof that no person is ever the worst thing that they've done, and CMN works to enable those who are on death row to be given the chance at repentance. Mary is proof that our God can enable anything to happen for those who trust. We never know who the next David or Mary will be.

Julie Penndorf is the Director of Campus Ministry at DeMatha Catholic High School, where she has been for the past seventeen years. She lives in Washington, DC with her husband and children and is an active member of St. Peter's Parish. She has been passionate about ending the use of the death penalty since hearing Helen Prejean speak at Boston College in 2001.



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