

Faith Journal

December 2009

After 11 months of ups and downs and difficult news of war and economy and massacre, it's a relief to know the Wise Men are on their way again in the Advent story.

Every December these mystery men lift my spirits. They scanned the stars and sojourned great distances to get spiritual answers. They were outsiders who nevertheless proved faithful. They endured political threats and far-flung dangers. Though they arrived a bit late, they thoughtfully brought gifts. They rose to the occasion. They stuck to the adventure despite everything. In other words, they are us – sojourners who, on good days and despite everything, stay alert to signs and pay homage to truth.

This is one of Advent's annual gifts: we are invited to take courage from the mysterious movements of the Christmas story, let our guard down, dare to see ourselves in the big story and surrender to its poetry.

Let the record show: these are not terribly poetic times. Fear, discouragement, cowardice, fatigue – the familiar list can grind down the spirit, making us forget that human beings are spiritual adventurers at heart. Advent marks an insurgency, a protest against soul impoverishment. Prepare for reversals of routine. Dare to be astonished.

It takes the season's poetry to reverse the standard daily humdrum logic.

"If you could turn your heart into a cow stall," declares 17th monastic poet Angelus Silesius, "Christ would be born again on earth."

Defenders of practicality like to dismiss poetry as a flight from reality, a weekend pursuit too fragile for the hard daily world. What they really mean is poetry makes them uncomfortable: it's too dangerous to be allowed to be taken seriously. Take Silesius' Advent aphorism. It is powerful enough to start a revolution. His metaphor turns an endless debate about spiritual credibility (are you "born again") upside down. Redemption is not about timetables of conversion. It proposes that everyone alter daily habits and networks so the gospel's teachings will find a place to land. If Jesus is to be "born again," then we must step in as the midwives, attendants who moments ago were the harried passersby. Our task: turn hearts into manger scenes to welcome gospel spirit strangers and magi too. An Advent metaphor becomes a practical, urgent instruction.

During Advent, the wonder of it all looms as big as the night sky. At this time of year, I search the stars with a little extra alertness; this is how they looked 2,000 years ago. I watch them not to escape the bad news here on earth but to give it a larger frame of reference. The vast evening horizon slows down the anxiety. It hands me a sense that the floating, spinning planet nears another annual appointment with truth, a truth emerging from winter darkness and connecting us to the churning stars and an invisible Creator, a biblical drama swaddled in a holy silence filling sky and mind and heart.

I know a lot of people who've quietly stopped going to church. They've shifted their imaginations to yoga or mother earth or organic grains. I think they've given up too hastily on Advent.

True enough, Christmas phrases like “A child is born” and “A savior has come into the world” have been rubbed smooth as old coins forgotten in the pocket. Some people no longer stir to the old words. But the story of the incarnation, the message of God with us, calls for every creative thought and action we can muster in response – poetry, painting, music, food, worship, compassion, wonder and amazement.

Incarnation means eternity has been stretched to touch the poor comings and goings of earth. Incarnation stands lodged and waiting in souls and substances, in the groaning atoms, in barnyard filth and the oratorios of Handel. It means our language and loves and storytelling carry the original hum and reverberation of that primordial holy diction, “In the beginning was the Word ...” God undergirds it all.

The idea of Advent always meets resistance. A stubbornly cut-and-dried religious culture focuses on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, then tosses out the Christmas tree that afternoon. Advent insists on reversing the flow, or slowing it down. It stretches the season through December to Jan. 6, the last of the Twelve Days of Christmas. Advent restores the journey, the sojourn, the adventure. Let the Wise Men be your escort. They know the territory.