

# Welcoming the Word in Year B

## Sowing the Seed

Verna A. Holyhead, S.G.S.



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# Introduction

In both the Old and New Testaments, the seed is a rich image of the Word of God: fertile and nourishing (Isa 55:10-11), scattered generously and inclusively (Mark 4:3-9), implanted for salvation in those who welcome it (Jas 1:21).

At every Sunday assembly the seed of the Word is scattered over us, different soils that we are. Sometimes we may be unreceptive to the Word, our bodies physically present but our hearts on the margins, trampled down by passing concerns and worries. At other times, we come with our hearts cluttered with rocks and thorns that we are too physically, emotionally, or spiritually exhausted to remove. But we still gather as God's field (1 Cor 3:9), and the Sower welcomes us.

And then there are the times when we are the good soil, when we offer to God the richness of our individual and communal lives, when we are eager to "Listen!" and allow God to break up the hardness and dryness of our hearts so that they yield thirty, sixty, a hundredfold harvest of discipleship (Mark 4:20). Then God, too, rejoices.

During his life, Vincent van Gogh produced many well-known "parables in paint" of wheat fields. There are fields under stormy skies, fields dotted with cornflowers, fields over which larks soar joyfully, or fields viciously attacked by marauding crows; sometimes his fields are crisscrossed with paths that stray out of the picture and then reappear. Sometimes the sower is present, always casting the seed with generous abandon, sometimes vigorous yet solitary, sometimes in the company of other sowers against a village background. Often a brilliant sun shines over the field, regardless of its great or small yield. When the sower is absent, it seems to suggest that the viewer is invited into the painting to cast the seed.

The Word of God longs to be welcomed no matter what the season of our lives: whether they are sunny or stormy, fruitful or parched; whether it is the

harsh calls of crows or the soaring songs of larks that we hear; whether our lives seem to be following well-marked paths or ways that suddenly seem to disappear and leave us feeling lost and unsure.

In this “Year of Mark,” the first evangelist is realistic about the hard sowing and difficult yield of discipleship. Those who at their first call along the Sea of Galilee left everything to follow Jesus (Mark 1:16-20) leave everything to run away from him in Gethsemane (Mark 14:50-51). It is not until he is crowned with death so that he may reign in risen life that the Markan disciples recognize and confess the meaning of suffering and Servanthood, and accept that this is the way they must follow. In our Sunday assemblies there are also people who fiddle on the edge of their seats, ready to flee for various reasons: perhaps because of the irrelevance or the negativity of the homily; perhaps because of the poor quality of the liturgy; perhaps they are divorced, remarried, angry or disillusioned by their experiences of hypocrisy, injustice, or lack of compassion in the church. But they still gather as “God’s field,” needing and hoping to experience the hospitality of the Sower in the words that are scattered over them by the one who is entrusted with this ministry.

To try to be true to the times we live in, true to people’s struggles, true to the demands of the biblical word, and true to one’s own integrity, makes great demands on the preacher. But I am convinced that it is not the smooth and polished verbal performance that is shod with self-confidence, but the honest, often stumbling effort that is welcomed by hearers of the Word who know from their own life experiences that:

. . . all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell; the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.<sup>1</sup>

And these verses are in the poem Hopkins entitled “God’s Grandeur” because this is the raw material of our lives over which, as he concludes, the Holy Ghost “Broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”

In many places, Sunday worship in the absence of a priest means that Christ’s nonordained faithful are now the ones who are entrusted with breaking open the Word and breaking open the hearts of their hearers to the work of the Spirit. I hope these reflections may be some small help for those who, reflectively and prayerfully, either alone or with others, want to prepare the soil for the sowing of the seed of God’s Word on Sunday or harvest its fruits by their *lectio divina* (sacred reading) throughout the following week. Having received the Word, we are called to be generous and joyous in casting abroad this seed in our families, communities, workplaces, and places of leisure—

without being too concerned about how and if it takes root because, as Paul reminds us, it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6).

I have also been privileged to have sown in my life the words of the Rule of Benedict.<sup>2</sup> In his Prologue, Benedict writes that our seeking of God is always to have “the Gospel as our guide” (RB Prol 14), and in his last chapter he repeats his conviction that the Old and New Testaments are “the truest of guides for human life” (RB 73.3). The biblical word is the constant companion of Benedict’s wise and humane “modest Rule” as he himself describes it (RB 73.8). Benedict’s and our own times are sixteen centuries apart, yet they have much in common. Benedict, too, witnessed great changes: wars, the collapse of the Roman Empire, social and economic insecurities that widened the gap between rich and poor, turmoil and controversy in the church about faith issues. Yet he found his way through this social and ecclesial minefield to found communities that provided rich soil in which the love of God and one’s brothers and sisters could flourish. As with the two former books in this series,<sup>3</sup> I have added for those who may be interested, and as a sixth chapter, a brief weekly reflection on the Rule of Benedict related to the Sunday lectionary. This is another small scattering of seed that can be ploughed into our lives along with the biblical word and, perhaps, increase its yield.

Verna A. Holyhead SGS  
Melbourne  
September 2007

## Notes

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Selected with an introduction and notes by W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963) 27.

2. References to the Rule of Benedict are indicated by RB or RB Prol for the Prologue. Unless otherwise indicated, the reference is to Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

3. *Welcoming the Word in Year C: With Burning Hearts* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006) and *Welcoming the Word in Year A: Building On Rock* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).



# 1

## The Season of Advent

“Coming, ready or not!” How often we heard or shouted this as children when we played hide-and-seek. The season of Advent is rather like a liturgical game of hide-and-seek. God calls to us that he is coming, whether we are ready or not, and will never give up the search, even though there are plenty of hiding places for us in our contemporary culture and commerce: in the frenetic shopping and conspicuous consumption encouraged by different shouts of “so many days to Christmas,” a countdown that in many places seems to start in October; in a succession of parties where Advent is submerged in the toasts to a “Happy Christmas”; in the personal and family worries about shopping lists, greeting cards, provisions for family gatherings, the juggling of who goes where and when for the Christmas visits and meals; in the end of the civil year and the many exhausting tasks that have to be completed before the new year begins.

In Year B, God calls to us through the Advent voices of the prophet Isaiah, King David, John the Baptist, Paul, Peter, and Mary of Nazareth. They speak to us with an urgency that is both fierce and gentle. The Old Testament readings proclaim that we should hope for big things: for heavens split open by God’s intervention in human history; for a world transformed, a cosmos where deserts blossom and rough places are made smooth; for the discovery of a genealogy that will make all humanity the sons and daughters of our messianic Ancestor. The second reading, from the apostolic letters, calls us to the Christian way that disciples should follow in the “in-between” time of the church as we wait for the end time.

A well-known process to help police in their search for a suspect is asking eyewitnesses to help them put together an “identikit,” a composite picture of remembered features of the sought one. Our Advent search is not for a criminal, but for a Savior, and the memories and witnesses of both Testaments help us to recognize him.

The readings for the First Sunday of Advent begin by resetting our liturgical clocks, fast-forwarding them to the time that is still ahead of us, the time when Christ will return in his Second Coming, the *parousía*, to claim the world definitively for himself, and the reigning presence of God will be everything to everyone (cf. 1 Cor 15:28). In this sense, history is always a waiting for this culminating advent at the end of human and cosmic time. And these particular four weeks are not a bored queuing and waiting for Christmas; rather, they are expectant, hopeful, the yearly “pregnancy” of the church, full of possibilities as we go into labor for the birth of a better world of justice and peace that will be worthy of becoming the new heaven and the new earth. On the Second and Third Sundays, the Advent clock is turned back to the adult John the Baptist, who tells us that the Christ stands among us, often unrecognized, so preoccupied are we with other concerns. Then it is the first hour of the new age and the new transformation of our humanity so that we can now say with the poet:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash

I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am . . .<sup>1</sup>

An angel’s annunciation of Immanuel, God-with-us, flashes from heaven, and the trumpet crash that will resound through the ages is muffled in the womb of a young and poor woman in the unimportant town of Nazareth. This is the advent of Christ in the flesh that has come once, in the past of a particular time and culture.

Our Advent clock is also an alarm that the church sets to wake us up to a continuing coming of Christ in our daily lives, to a greater awareness of the divine presence and a deeper knowledge of the divine love. Christ is still being born, not in his own human flesh but in our hearts if we offer him the hospitality of our discipleship. Ours is the dignity and challenge to accept the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit, into the most intimate depths of our lives, and then bear him to others. This is not the season for gazing nostalgically into a crib or fearfully into the heavens. It is a time to rise from sleep, to pray, to avoid the premature celebration of Christmas, to wait with eager readiness rather than exhausted idleness for the advent of the Lord who has come, is coming, and will come again.

### **First Sunday of Advent**

• Isa 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7 • Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19 • 1 Cor 1:3-9 • Mark 13:33-37

The Advent liturgy is full of shouting—and needs to be, as the Word of God competes with the external noise of Musak jingles or blasts of pre-

Christmas bargain advertising, as well as the internal noise of our own worries about what has to be planned in family, at work, for holidays, in these weeks before Christmas. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” shout the returning Babylonian exiles of the sixth century B.C.E. They were a community in crisis, a ragged group of exiles who had returned from Babylon (in present-day Iraq) to the devastation of their Jerusalem Temple and their land. They are facing opposition from the “locals,” those who had not been exiled and did not welcome the return of people who might upset their settled life. Bold and audacious in their hope, familiar and abrasive in their speech, the remnant people still recognize God as their *goʿel*, “redeemer” or nearest kin, charged in the Jewish tradition with the protection of the weak and needy. The returned exiles implore God to make their present sorrow and disillusionment the birth pangs of something new. Isaiah’s wonderful imagery can speak to us, no matter what our present climatic season, for we recognize that we often walk in the winter of personal sinfulness; that we can be withered people blown about aimlessly like a heap of dead leaves; that although exiled by sin we can beg our redeeming God to help us return home and live. We may look back on the past year and realize that there have been times when our lack of integrity and our lethargy have piled up like dirty laundry on those frenetic days when we had neither the time nor energy to do any washing. The days of Advent call us to some vigorous “laundering,” to the repentance that enables us to continue our journey of faith clothed in the fresh grace of our baptism. The responsorial Psalm 80 is insistent about the need for the Advent repentance as we pray: “Lord, make us turn to you, let us see your face and we shall be saved,” even though it is a gentler repentance than that of Lent.

“And yet . . .” our God is like a potter who also gets dirty, but not because of lethargy. Just as a potter gets dirty because of willingness to engage in the messy business of shaping and reshaping the clay, our Potter God is immersed in the shaping and reshaping of our human clay. In the fullness of time, the clay of Israel’s and our humanity was formed by the Potter into the body of Jesus. It is our Christian privilege to know, in faith that goes infinitely beyond even prophetic imagery and imagination, that God has heard our cry, has torn open not only the heavens but also the womb of a young and poor woman, so that Jesus might become flesh among us. What was begun in a humble, hidden way in Mary, was fired in the kiln of his passion, shattered on Calvary, and recast in risen glory—a glory beyond the vision of Isaiah.

Through the words of Isaiah, God assures the people that he is always their *goʿel*, their redeemer and nearest kin, has never been absent from them, is always ready and waiting to be found, even by those who have given up

seeking their God. “Here I am, here I am,” God also calls to us this Advent. Meister Eckhardt, a fourteenth-century mystic, described spirituality as “waking up” to the presence of God in our lives, especially in our sisters and brothers—those elbowing, jostling, lonely, unloved, and (we might consider) unlovable people around us or distant from us to whom we are called to reach out in practical compassion, justice, and prayer.

“Keep awake!” are the first words with which Mark greets us at the beginning of this new year of the church. They are also the last words spoken by Jesus in Mark’s gospel (Mark 13:37) before the vortex of violence begins to suck Jesus into the passion and death that he will conquer by his resurrection. So even as we begin Advent, we are reminded of the paschal mystery of Christ, the hub of the liturgical year. Today’s gospel is part of Mark 13, the chapter that is known as his “little apocalypse.” Apocalypse is sometimes called the literature of the oppressed, as it usually arises from and is addressed to people in a time of uncertainty or suffering, present or imminent. Such was the situation of the Markan church, persecuted and unsure what the next day would bring in terms of fidelity to or betrayal of their faith. In one sense, uncertainty is always the season of the church as we await the return of Jesus, the great Traveler, who has gone abroad from the home of his human presence with us, but will return at his Second Coming when human history has run its course. We are uncertain about the day or the hour *of* this, because it is known only to the Father; but we have the certainty of faith that there is an end *for* the world: a faith that Christ will come again to pour out upon the cosmos the extravagant love of God that will transform it into the new heaven and new earth. When the new impinges on our lives to threaten the established order, we often express our reaction to this in terms of cosmic collapse: “I felt as though my whole world was collapsing!” In the verses immediately before today’s gospel, Jesus has spoken about the end of the old order in terms of the “passing away” of heaven and earth. The old order is the predictable, the ingrained habits, the mindless and often oppressive “business as usual.” Jesus’ words announce a new reality for which we must be awake and alert. Advent is our yearly reminder that, immersed in the present as we necessarily are, nonetheless we always stand on the edge of the future, secure in the words of Jesus which will not pass away but will help us journey into a new and hopeful transformation (cf. Mark 13:31-32).

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.<sup>2</sup>

Mark describes the “Jesus journey” through the parable of a man who goes abroad and leaves his servants in charge of his household. Just as each

one of the servants in the parable is given a specific work to do during his master's absence, so we, as members of God's household, are to be daily committed to our baptismal calling in our own circumstances, "evening, morning, cockcrow, dawn." Especially as "doorkeepers," we are to watch out for and open our personal and communal lives to the advent of God. Modern science speaks of the cosmos in terms of millennia of millennia, yet we know that this is not the scale of our own lifetime. The natural process of aging, perhaps the diagnosis of our own or our loved one's terminal illness, the sudden fatal accident, the ravages of natural disasters—all these are reminders of our much shorter time and our need to be prepared for that "personal parousia," Christ's advent in our death.

It may sound from the reading of the beginning of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians that everything was going well in their church, but to read the Letter in its entirety makes it clear that the Corinthians were also experiencing crises. Disturbed by internal rival factions, deviant sexual practices, marital difficulties, disputes about liturgy and community roles, they too needed to be encouraged to use the gifts of the Spirit that they had received in baptism, and so recognize the revelation of Christ and endure in fidelity to him. Paul encourages them to put their lives under the loving reign of God until this is definitively established on earth "on the day of the Lord Jesus Christ," the second coming of Jesus. Like the Corinthians, we are still waiting for that day, are still in the "in-between-time" that stretches from Pentecost to parousia. Waiting can sap our energies unless it is pregnant with hope, compassionate for those who have no hope, vigilant for justice, and faithful to the promises of God spoken to us by Jesus.

Today in our churches or homes we light the first candle on the Advent wreath: a small flame is struck on an evergreen circle, a simple ritual and symbol of the first flicker of hope in the One who is the Light of the world, who will lead us through every darkness to eternal life with God who is without beginning or end. "Marana tha," "Come, Lord," is our persistent Advent cry.

## **Second Sunday of Advent**

• Isa 40:1-5, 9-11 • Ps 85:9-14 • 2 Pet 3:8-14 • Mark 1:1-8

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . .": these are the first words of the first Gospel to be written. When we hear these words proclaimed in the assembly, do we experience any of the excitement of other beginnings—the birth of a child, the new lease of life after radical surgery, the breaking of dawn after a dark spiritual night? Mark's

proclamation is abrupt; it has none of the narrative charm of Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives, nor the meditative poetry of John's Prologue. It plunges us urgently into the good news of God's promised salvation that comes through the anointed humanity of Jesus the Christ who, in his Sonship, is also the presence of God among us. Mark will not write of an "ending" to the good news because it continues to be proclaimed and lived by disciples of all future millennia.

The prophet Isaiah had been the spokesman for God who promised to send "my messenger" to prepare the way for the people's deliverance from the wilderness of Babylonian exile (Isa 40:3). Again, when the people become disillusioned with the priestly leadership of the fifth century B.C.E., the prophet Malachi speaks of the messenger who will come to the Temple in turbulent times to show the way to prepare for the day of the coming of the Lord (Mal 3:1). Add to these words a hint of the guiding wilderness angel (Exod 23:20), and Mark is building up an "identikit" of the one whom he then presents to us as John the Baptist.

For the next two Sundays, Mark will encourage us in our fidelity to the good news of Jesus Christ through the voice of John the Baptist, a voice that cannot be silenced. Herod Antipas tried to do just that by beheading John (Mark 6:27-29), yet here we are, two thousand years later, listening to him. The Liturgy of the Word puts the adult John before us today and next Sunday to block our view of "baby Jesus," and so remind us that the Advent-Christmas mystery is less about the child and more about the adult Coming One and the mystery of his life, death, and resurrection that he offers to us as our own mystery. We are called to make our way down to the Jordan with the hopeful and curious crowds to see this wilderness man. John had accepted the hospitality that the desert had offered him. Cruncher of the desert food of bitter locusts sweetened with wild honey, he is satisfied with the food of the poor; clad in rough camel hair, he is dressed like a new Elijah (2 Kgs 1:5-8); tempered in his spirit by solitude, John, in his turn, welcomes the crowds with a bittersweet message in sparse words that are honed to a fine cutting edge for slicing through consciences and exposing them to the truth.

Son of a priest though he may be, John does not deliver his message in the Temple or anywhere else in Jerusalem, but on the banks of the Jordan River. At this busy crossing place, so significant in the history of Israel's journey into the Promised Land (cf. Josh 3), John urges the people to cross over into God's forgiveness through the waters of a ritual baptism of repentance. The Baptist invites us, too, to honest mindfulness of the water—not of the Jordan, but of our baptism—and to examination of our consciousness about our fidelity to the Christ into whom we are baptized. Despite the crowds he draws,

John's self-evaluation has nothing of self-exaltation. At this high point of his popularity he speaks directly to the people to point them away from himself to the Stronger One who is coming, and declares that he is unworthy even to be a slave who would bend down and untie the sandals on the smelling and sweating feet of this Coming One. John resists the temptation of successful ministers: to allow our own popularity to become the main concern of our ministry. When we do this, we are proclaiming what we consider the good news of ourselves, not of Jesus.

In the Puerto Rican city of San Juan, named for John, there stands a huge stone sculpture of the precursor. It is located between the ocean and a main highway of this busy modern city. With the relentlessness of the stone from which he is carved, the Baptist stands with head bent and eyes looking down the highway. But one arm is raised high with a determined finger pointing to heaven. The statue expresses the gospel paradox of John the Baptist, the earthy man of both the wilderness and the Jordan crowds, and the heaven-directed prophet; the paradox of disengagement and engagement—and so the embodiment of the paradox of the Advent season. Day after day, as surely as the waves break on the shore, our lives must be directed to heaven, and yet we must also be involved in the rush and business of daily life. The former is almost certainly the more difficult during these weeks. But it can be done if we opt to deliberately turn off the TV or transistor, to unplug our ears from iPods or mobile phones and turn to a few moments of silent reflection about the hopes and promises of Advent; if we plug our listening into some quiet reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*)—perhaps a reread of some of the Sunday texts; if we seize a few moments of prayerful repentance or awareness of the presence of God in our traveling companions along our highways or on public transport or shopping. These are ways in which we can respond to Psalm 85 and “hear what the Lord God has to say.”

In the first reading, Second Isaiah shouts to the returning exiles God's message of comfort found at the beginning of what is called “the Book of the Consolation of Israel” (Isa 40–55). God will be faithful to the people who have suffered the terror of exile, even though at times their fidelity to God has withered like dried-up grass, and their love has faded like a dead flower. With the strength of a gentle Shepherd who cares for the weakest and most vulnerable in his flock, God will carry the exhausted ones to rest once more in their own land. How like the Shepherd can we be in these Advent weeks? Will we make any personal, communal, or financial effort to carry the weak and the lonely that may be as near as our own families? In our communities or parishes will we be heralds of Good News to the exiles: the asylum seekers, the refugee families, those unvisited in aged care facilities or hospitals?

On their way to expensive boutiques, casinos, pampering health clubs, or cosmetic surgery, do those who travel past their sisters and brothers in need ever suspect that it is the affluent “beautiful people” who may themselves be the exiles in most need of human and divine consolation? If our lives and our world are to prosper according to God’s plan, it is time for mercy and faithfulness to meet, for justice and peace to embrace, as we have prayed in the responsorial Psalm 85.

The Second Letter of Peter reminds us that God who is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 90:2) does not measure time as we do. It may be difficult for us to keep focused on the importance of waiting during the four Advent weeks; God can outwait us, patient for the whole world to come to repentance so that it can be transformed into what God has promised: “new heavens and new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Pet 3:13). This will happen through the men and women who live holy, just, and peaceful lives, and so establish the reigning presence of God in themselves and others throughout human history. Such people will be ready to be “stolen” by Christ for the new creation.

### **Third Sunday of Advent**

• Isa 61:1-2a, 10-11 • Luke 1:46-50, 53-54 • 1 Thess 5:16-24 • John 1:6-8, 19-28

Today the adult John the Baptist appears at the beginning of John’s gospel, but in a very different context to last Sunday’s Markan appearance. In the Fourth Gospel, the Baptist is situated right in the middle of the Prologue, the great Johannine hymn to the glory of Christ, the Word and the Light, in whose human flesh God pitched his tent among us. John is there as a lamp who will guide the feet of God’s people to the true Light, announcing to them the secure way to cross from the old order to the new. The closer the lamp-carrier comes to the Light, the dimmer his own radiance becomes until, no longer needed, it disappears completely.

The interrogators have been sent by the religious authorities in Jerusalem; John has been sent by God. When questioned by the Jewish priests and Levites, John humbly gives his testimony. Quite deliberately, the evangelist contrasts John’s self-effacing “I am not . . .”—not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the long-awaited prophet (cf. Deut 18:15)—with the “I AMs” that Jesus will speak. Once again the Baptist describes himself, in the words of Isaiah, as only a voice crying in the wilderness: a voice enabled by the Spirit/Breath of God that will call Jesus to baptism in the Jordan waters, and a voice that calls us today to renew our own baptismal commitment and so prepare a straight

way for the Lord to enter the wilderness places of our own lives. The priests and Levites have been sent to discover the mystery of John the Baptist, but he points them away from himself to the greater mystery of the One who is coming, who already stands among them, and they do not recognize him. John seeks no status with the Jewish leaders or the crowds; he is not even worthy to be a menial sandal-slave of the Christ.

In the screenplay for Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, there is a poignant example of someone who, because of personal ambition, was not content with any self-effacement. The young Richard Rich pesters Thomas More for patronage, begging him to use his influence at Henry VIII's court for Richard's advancement. But More, disillusioned by the corruption he sees there, tries to convince Rich that his ambition is misconceived. He offers Rich a post in a local school, urging him to become a great teacher. Rich's cynical response is to query who would know about this so-called greatness. More replies that Rich himself would know it, his pupils would know it—and God would know it. This would not be a bad audience. But it is not good enough for the ambitious Rich who has his eyes on the political summit and those whom he considers will be a more adoring audience. He eventually perjures himself and betrays More, going on his self-centered and crooked way to become the Lord Lieutenant for Wales while, like John the Baptist, Thomas More goes on to be beheaded.

In the first reading, (Third) Isaiah proclaims a jubilee, "a year of the Lord's favor," to the depressed postexilic community. It is uncertain if such a fiftieth year was ever actually celebrated in Israel, but the Jubilee nevertheless remained in the Jewish tradition as a powerful metaphor of God's blessings that establish freedom for the dispossessed and disadvantaged. As one of the oldest dreams of the traditions of Israel, the Jubilee waits to be dreamed again, not in sleep but in action. Isaiah has the tongue, the imagination, and the boldness to bring to speech and consciousness not only what has happened but also what should happen. The goodness and justice of God will bring another springtime for the winter people of Zion; their joy will be like that of a newly married couple in whose love is the promise of new life. In Luke's gospel, the adult Jesus quotes the beginning of this text to announce his mission of justice for the poor and disadvantaged (Luke 4:18-21). At the dawn of the third millennium, the United Nations General Assembly proposed eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in the social sphere: to eradicate poverty; achieve universal education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; develop a global partnership for development. As W. B. Yeats wrote:

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
 I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
 Tread softly, for you tread on my dreams.<sup>3</sup>

How softly or roughly do we tread as individuals, communities, nations, upon the fragile dreams of the poor? Or is our soft treading a tiptoeing away from their needs expressed by the MDGs? The response to the Isaian reading is the freedom song of Mary, who proclaims out of her poverty the richness of God's salvation whom she carries in her womb: Jesus, the Coming One, who will be liberty for the oppressed in a way that infinitely surpasses Isaiah's dreams and hope.

This Third Sunday of Advent is also known as "Laetare" (the Latin for "rejoice") Sunday because of the theme of joy in the readings and because we are more than halfway through Advent, and coming closer to Christmas. Isaiah assures the exiles that their mourning will be turned to joy; the Baptist is humbly confident in the Coming One whom he announces. Paul tells his Thessalonians to "Rejoice always!" because they now live in Christ Jesus. Filled with his Spirit, they are prophets: men and women who speak forth God's word with freedom and courage. For this, discernment is needed so that the Thessalonians hold fast to whatever is good, and avoid every evil. Joy, prayer, and gratitude are the fitting responses to the promises of our faithful God who will never fail us.

#### Fourth Sunday of Advent

• 2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16 • Ps 89:2-5, 27, 29 • Rom 16:25-27 • Luke 1:26-38

The heavens have been torn open; God has come down, not with mountain quaking and fire burning, but in the gentle descent of the Spirit who broods over the womb of Mary of Nazareth. And as at the first creation life was called forth, so now the first cell of the new creation is conceived. The *shekinah*, the cloud of the Presence of the Most High, overshadows Mary (cf. Exod 40:35), and the Son of God is at home among us. During Advent the Liturgy of the Word tells us that we bump into God in strange places: in the poor, in crowds and, strangest of all, in the obscure village of Nazareth and one of its backwater young women. Mary is a powerless female in a world ruled by males; poor, in a highly stratified society; found to be pregnant before she cohabits with her husband, and so obviously not carrying his child to validate her existence. That God should find her a "favored one" is hugely surprising, especially to Mary!

The Lukan biblical imagination has captured the imagination of artists down through the centuries. With their own prophetic insight, they have set the extraordinary faith of Mary among familiar things: a half-read book, a meal in preparation, a door open on children and animals at play, people passing by. One of the more unusual depictions is that by Henry Ossawa Tanner, an African American painter (1859–1937). In a Middle Eastern-style bedroom, Mary sits enfolded in the heavy drapes of bedclothes and her own robe, her gaze attentive. All is simplicity, not luxury, and there is no winged angel. What Mary's gaze is fixed on is a tall, thin pillar of white cloud at the end of her bed. Perhaps Tanner is remembering the presence of God, the "angel" of Exodus 14:19, described as a cloud, that led the Israelites into their future, would lead Mary into hers, and will lead us through the ordinary and familiar events and places where God is present—if we will only recognize him and respond with our own, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

The Greek Orthodox church at Nazareth is built over an ancient spring that fed the village well, and clear, fresh water can still be drawn from it. The Orthodox tradition is that the annunciation occurred at a well, for that was the place of betrothal for the Old Testament lovers such as Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah, and so was a fitting place for the New Testament betrothal of the Word to humanity in the womb of Mary.

God's dream of a fitting home for his Son was very different from that divine place David proposes in the first reading. After he has "settled down" (the phrase is significant) in his house of cedar, David has the bright idea of also building a fine house in which Israel's God could dwell. David is surprised by God's response, spoken through the prophet Nathan after some prophetic second thoughts and dreams! Settling down, says Nathan, is not characteristic of Israel's God, who is not a God to be circumscribed and enthroned like the gods of their pagan neighbors. The God of Israel is a free, exodus God, who prefers to move among the people, pitching his tent where he pleases. David's God, Mary's God, our God, is a surprising God who always takes the initiative and often turns upside down the tables of our expectations. With skillful word play, the biblical author announces through Nathan that *God* will build *David* a house! This will be the genealogical house of the Davidic dynasty where God will be at home with his people in a special way. And in the future, one of David's descendants will build a house for God's name and establish a kingdom that will be everlasting.

This does not happen in the stone-and-cedar Temple built by David's son, Solomon, nor in the Second postexilic Temple. Its beginning, as the gospel proclaims, is in human flesh and blood, in the womb of Mary of Nazareth.

This is the surprising and humanly unimaginable mystery that Paul describes as kept secret for long ages but now revealed in Christ. We sing our way across the bridge between the first and second readings with the repeated refrain of the responsorial Psalm 89. “I will sing for ever of your steadfast love, O Lord.” God’s faithful love for David is made incarnate in Jesus Christ, and in Paul’s concluding doxology to his Letter to the Romans he reminds his Gentile Romans that they, too, have inherited the promise of this love. We Gentiles, gathered as a community of praise around the tables of word and sacrament, are called to sing our praise to God—not just in the eucharistic liturgy, but with lives that are committed to “the obedience of faith.”

Every Advent we are challenged to have the attentiveness of Mary to the flutter of Christ-life that stirs in the womb of our complacency. So often our world seems starved of stars; and so often we watch or participate in rituals of mourning for acts of terrorism, natural disaster, the local tragedies of road deaths, or other dark events. Usually in these rituals there are candles: small pieces of self-consuming wax and flame that say light has more right to exist in our world than darkness. This is the message, too, of our Advent wreath as we light the last of its four candles. But those candles, like all ritual candles, will burn out. It is up to us, disciples of the Light of the world, to catch fire from Christ’s mystery and bring something of this fire and light into our own lives and, especially, into the lives of those for whom Christmas may not be a feast of joy but a time of darkness that stirs painful memories of those with whom they can no longer celebrate because of death, separation, divorce, family quarrels. For the friendless, the homeless, the abused, Christmas may arouse bitter comparisons and regrets. The fire we catch from Christ, our readiness to be consumed like him in the flame of loving service of our sisters and brothers, may be as simple a gift as a visit, a letter, a phone call, an invitation to a meal, a present on the parish “Giving Tree.” But it will mean that, together, we will truly celebrate something of a “Happy Christmas.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*. Selected and edited by W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982) 66.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” in “Four Quartets,” *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) 197.

<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2000) 59.