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Advent 2

Open... in a world such as this etc., how can we celebrate peace and mark Advent....

Despite the fact that a rather crazed John the Baptist, dressed in camel's hair shirt and living off bugs and wild honey – is proclaiming a baptism for the remission of sins in the wilderness and foretelling the wrath to come, the whole Judean countryside is flocking to him seeking forgiveness – journeying down to the steep mountain path from Jerusalem to the Jordan valley, down, down, down toward the Dead Sea – down from a temperate and green Jerusalem to the most desolate, most Godforsaken, lowest spot on earth. Despite all this craziness, a population in hysteria about its sinfulness confessing to some weirdo in the deadest possible place. Despite this beginning, we have transformed Advent into a kinder, gentler Lent – a soft, reflective season of penitence and expectancy of good things to come, wrapped in blue and candlelight.

Advent is a season that I prefer to think of as a call to holiness and wholeness rather than to breast-beating penitence – not that we don't need that too. The holiness of St. Mary the Virgin, Mother of God. The holiness of Blessed Elizabeth. The holiness of Joseph and Zechariah. But this season issues this same call to us, too: the call to be a holy people, a royal priesthood, “leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God,” as St. Peter's epistle admonishes us. “Therefore, beloved,” the author writes, “while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without

spot or blemish....” Wholeness, holiness. Alas, there can be no wholeness or holiness without repentance.

For such a person as I, and maybe you, the kindness and gentleness of Advent is a blessing. And for the many raised in strict, guilt-ridden Christian traditions, Advent’s tender insistence on self-examination and accountability can prove a blessing in this cool, blue, calm, quiet, blessed, forgiving season. Relax Advent begs, relax into repentance.

A parable: One night, years ago, I awoke from a dream with the startling realization that my very soul, the very center of my being, is like a pure, shining, luminescent crystal sphere. Most of the time, that crystal sphere is buried deep within. And over the months, over the years, that crystal sphere becomes dark and clouded and distorted. It needs constant maintenance through prayer and self-examination and the Eucharist, and the strength I draw from my colleagues, and, perhaps most of all, the strength that I draw from you, my wonderful brethren, as we journey through life’s joys and sorrows, life’s cruel disasters, and even life’s boredom together.

Sometimes that luminescent crystal sphere within me becomes so motley and contorted that it is scarcely recognizable. And when that happens, the spiritual malady can only be cured by bringing that sphere out of my depths and bathing it in the pure, clear, piercing aura of the light of Christ. And then the surprise comes.

I had this dream or vision about the crystal sphere deep in the night after reading a book by a Jewish mystic [Lawrence Kushner, *God Was in the Place, and I, i Did not Know* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993); small repeated I is correct.] who addressed our clergy conference years ago. The book is an extended meditation on the familiar story of Jacob’s ladder and Jacob’s startling realization the morning after the vision of the angels passing up and down to heaven: “God was in this place, and I, I did not know.” God was here and my ego was so big, I, I

did not notice. God was here and I, I was so preoccupied with my busyness that I, I did not notice. God was here and I was so guilty or distracted or so filled with spiritual noise and my flight from home and the brother I betrayed that I missed it.

Within this context, our rabbinical mystic meditates on the nature of Jacob's sin, a meditation that should be a revelation all about our own sin. What the rabbi notices is that most of our sins, our mistakes, our miscalculations, most of our sins are, in fact, perversions of virtue. They are something beautiful and crystal clear turned to muck. All our sins and mistakes and miscalculations, if held up to the light of God which we acknowledge as Christ and our rabbi acknowledges as Torah, all our sins are wonderful parts of ourselves gone awry.

What else, then, is today's temper tantrum except an example of my earnest desire to make things better right away, a desire turned into anger by my impatience. What else is lust or jealousy but love gone awry; sublimate it and it turns into affection or godly love? What else is envy but admiration gone askew? What else is vaunting ambition but the desire to do the best possible thing in the best possible way – a desire carried to such extremes that it damages the self and others? What else is drinking and drugging to excess but the desire to feel better about oneself and to be loved and maybe even to touch God. What else is the sinful addiction to luxury and wealth but a desire to live the good life combined with the misplaced notion that having all that we want will help us live more fully the life abundant.

And when we go down, down deep within ourselves and examine our most dastardly deeds and thoughts, and own them instead of repressing them, we discover that God is there, even in our sin. And when we hold our faults up to the bright light of Torah or the pure luminescence of the Christ Child amongst us. When we hold them up to that light and see our sins for what they really are, we do not say sorry sorry sorry and promise God we'll never do these things again. We

do not hate ourselves and repress every naughty thing we have ever done in our guilt-ridden body and soul. When we hold our sins up to the light of Christ, we can claim our sins as our own and redeem them. Like Jacob we can look at our estranged brother Esau, now, years later, come to be reconciled with us, and see the very face of God

We can turn lust into affection or love. We can turn envy into selfless admiration. We can turn rage into constructive anger. We can turn ambition into serving and being with others. We can turn our addiction to luxury and security into giving of ourselves and our possessions for others. For when we genuinely repent, we allow God to turn our evil into good so that our sins work for, not against, us, and with, not against, the world.

This is the call of Advent, the call of the wild man in the wilderness, the call of Peter: to turn ourselves around, to plunge into our depths and find the besmirched crystal sphere within, to examine ourselves and all of our being in the light of Christ's grace, and turn darkness into light.

Anglicanism has produced two cathedral deans whose lives were sometimes far from pure but whose literary glory reflected the glory of the Son. One, Jonathan Swift, dean of St. Patrick's Dublin, showed us how laughable, how absurd, how bathetic, how ungodly our sins are. The other, John Donne, dean of St. Paul's London, famous for his difficult and sometimes naughty poetry, preached wondrous Advent sermons. Donne talks with poignancy about the three births of Christ. Yes, three. The first at the big bang of all creation when the eternal Father begot the eternal son and the Holy Spirit proceeded to form the perfect unity in Trinity. The second, of course, was the Son's incarnation in the womb of Mary, as the lord of all creation emptied himself into the life of a little babe and became one with us. And the third birth. The third birth? That is the birth of the Christ who became one with us at our baptism and awaits every year at this season to be born

again in our hearts and lives. This third birth is of that perfect, luminescent crystal sphere which I see shining through your faces on many a morn and particularly at this season of miracle, this season of new life and new light. And in you, I see the very face of God. In a world such as this, what better can we do, etc...