
WORD MADE FLESH

A Time of Emptying*

Second Sunday in Advent

Baruch 5:1-9; Psalm 126:1-6; Philippians 1:4-6; Luke 3:1-10

Advent. Little Lent. A time of emptying, purgation, giving-up, letting go. The time of the wilderness.

Not hard to grasp this time of year: "winter with its thorough levelling" (W.H. Auden). Not hard having, in the first Gospel reading for Advent, been drawn up sharp with its vision of the end of the accepted order of things, the end of our comfortable kingdoms.

And now, we are invited to the second step, the recognition of our wilderness, the place of our wandering. We hear the voice of him who announces, the forerunner, John the Baptizer. And the announcement does not please us.

Repentance.

It echoes in our wilderness. Odd, how it can echo in a place so thoroughly levelled, so empty and barren.

Inside.

Inside, where still I hold the memory of sorrow and wonder, of tears and laughter. In these valleys and mountains of the past it echoes. And I cling to echoes, to this touch of definition given by the old order, the old kingdoms.

As I creep towards repentance I lose the way and cannot even make out the lay of the land. The definition of things is blurred. Where once, so short a time ago, I was, at least, certain the valleys of sorrow and the mountains of wonder were mine to experience, mine to weep over, and even the occasion of my laughter. Were they all simply cast by my own light, matters of my own making?

Only the flatness remains. Repentance. Of this, too, must I finally repent?

"Jerusalem, take off your dress of sorrow and distress..."The words echo in the first reading from Baruch. A hymn of invitation. The invitation of Advent, the little Lent; the invitation to us for whom all that remains is the wilderness; all that is familiar to us is its flatness. At least here sorrow and distress are welcome visitors. They bring the feeling of definition, the remnant of the old order, kingdoms past. And we cling to it, as if there-in lies our salvation.

St. Paul, in today's reading, is confident that "the One who began this good work in you will see that it is finished when the Day of Christ Jesus comes." Easy to say from the other side of the nativity. But this is the Second Sunday of Advent. Jerusalem is called to "take off [her] dress of sorrow and distress." And all those who joined the fledgling community at Philippi to whom Saint Paul writes, they are called to love each other and deepen their perception, so they are prepared for the Day of Christ. And, John, the Forerunner, the one who offered the baptism of repentance, that voice crying in the wilderness, calls us to prepare the way.

Advent. Little Lent. The time of emptying, purgation, giving-up, letting go. The time of the wilderness.

Do we journey to the nativity, to the place of the incarnation, for "birth or death." Like T.S. Eliot, in his poem the "Journey of the Magi", I too have seen birth and death and thought they were different. But this Birth we are moving towards "is such hard and bitter agony" demanding even our wilderness, our sorrow and distress. Advent, the little Lent.

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